

Faith's Fury

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Summary: The Master Chief and the Arbiter. What more can you ask for? Ah, also add in to that the fact that they never agree, and you're more likely to find them trying to kill each other than actually talking. Ch 7 up. M for violence and some odd concepts.

1. Chapter One

Faith's Fury

> By: Sinead<p>

Chapter One: Hatred of Truth

John 117 nearly shook with his fury. Never before had he felt this way. Never. Not when they glassed Reach, killing the Spartan-IIs, not when he had been taunted by fellow UNSC officers for being a "freak," not when he had been recruited at age six, not ever.

But to face this . . . Arbiter . . .

He never felt this complete anger.

And the Arbiter didn't know that he was being watched. Johnson, however, watched the watcher, walking up to stand beside the huge armor-wearing Master Chief, silent for a change. The two men had come to share an uncanny and unlikely friendship that was born from their dual survival from Halo.

Looking down at the sergeant so silently and coldly, the Master Chief turned and left, his rubber-soled boots clunking softly against the metal floors. Arbiter turned from his view of the stars at the noise, seeing the retreating, stalking back of the Spartan. He looked at Johnson, stating, "He is formidable. Could have killed me."

"But didn't, kid. The Master Chief has ethics, honor, codes. Some of them that even I will never understand."

"So why didn't he? I . . . at least, at one point, I would not have

hesitated to kill one of your kind. And I have seen footage of the Demon killing many of my own species. Sometimes they had seen him coming. Most times not."

"Well, what can I say? I don't know him any better than I know you. All I know is that there is a lot of things that the two of you have in common. And that the UNSC needs both of you. Try not to worry. He won't kill you." Johnson winked, walking away. "At least, unless you try to kill him first. Don't make yourself a bigger target than you already are."

Arbiter blinked. What was that facial expression supposed to mean? The closing of one eye quickly, accompanied by a partial upturning of the sides of the mouth and lips? Odd, indeed. Sighing, he turned and walked to the rooms that he had been graciously given, stepping inside the darkened room and closing the door behind him. In a sudden fit of rage at not understanding, he ripped his helmet from his head and hurled it to his right.

It didn't land.

Spinning, subtly landing in an unarmed defense method, he saw the iridescent olive armor of the Demon. The Arbiter didn't move, the Chief didn't move. After a long silence, though, the all-but-outlawed Elite broke his gaze off angrily, moving deeper into his rooms. "What do you want."

"You were at Reach."

"I was."

"You know how many you killed?"

"Not all the planet was destroyed, Demon. Fifty percent still lives. There wasn't enough time between Reach's fall and the discovery of the Halo to complete the job." A single, glaring eye shone over his shoulder as he turned his head. "And you are one to speak about the numbers of brethren you have killed." He smoothly removed the armor from his arms, letting his skin breathe.

"In defense. There's a difference."

"Is there. Enlighten me."

John fought the urge to kill the Arbiter with his own ugly helmet. He turned it over within his hands, unable to really feel the metal and the filigree through his gauntlet-bound hands. Taking silent, deep breaths, John regained whatever small amount of patience he had left, growling out, "Your kind attacked mine first. Want to tell me why?"

Arbiter still stood with his back to the Demon . . . his personal Demon, the one who caused him to become what he was. He knew that the humans had done nothing to deserve the Covenant's attention. He knew that they all did what the Prophets told them to do, no questions asked.

"They told us in their silver, poison-laced tongue that it was none of our business to wonder why we were being sent against you." He looked over his shoulder again, encountering no eyes, no face beyond

the golden, reflective faceplate. "So we never asked." He snarled his words angrily. "Did you ask to be what you became? A Demon?"

John had had enough. He ripped his own helmet from his head, glaring completely into the alien's eyes. "I was conscripted. I didn't ask. I was six. And I was given a reason to be, to live. There's no comparison between us."

Arbiter's eyes swept over this human's face, panic rising. The rage, the hate, the loathing was eminent even to the non-human. The Demon's blue eyes were as hard as gems, glittering dangerously. This man had killed too many Elites to count. This man had killed . . . but . . .

"You do not enjoy killing."

Both helmets fell to the floor, the Spartan sitting behind them, elbows on his knees, his face still angered, still hate-filled, but no longer aimed at the Elite, as it was aimed instead at the floor. "When it's you freaks who've killed my family, my friends, everything I've known, I hold no regrets."

"We were lied to. I have no honor left because of what the Prophets ordered me to do. The Heretics that I had been sent to subdue were right. They had been correct all along. Your kind were right about things that none of my kind would have even questioned as wrong." Arbiter sat as well, long and lanky legs seeming awkward as he did so. "And . . . on behalf of those who I now see as being right, I apologize."

John looked up, wary. "I don't trust or believe you."

"You don't have to. I do not trust you, for all that I understand some of you."

"Some Elite saying?"

"Hm. An old one, from before there was even the Covenant."

The door shot open, revealing Johnson, who stopped immediately. "Getting over differences, boys?" He blinked at John. "Been a long time since I've seen your face. You need sun, boy! Too blasted white. Tan up! That's an order! You want the gals to see that pasty mug of yours? Heck, no! Tannin's the way to go, m'boy!"

John snorted, rising, picking himself up from the floor, hearing the Elite move as he did. Still bent, he picked the helmets up. One lacking any degree of individuality, one filled with a remorseful personality. He held the Arbiter's helmet out, replying to Johnson. "Finding that those differences aren't so different than I had first thought."

Arbiter took the helmet, looking into the Demon's face from a closer angle. And nodded once, feeling the Spartan release his helmet.

* * *

>It was eleven months later, and they were about to kill each other .
. . again.<p><p>

"As if I am one who cares about your race! We are allies because of _circumstances_, not because we Elites suddenly decided to be affable!"

"You _could_ have been _nicer_! Commander Keyes has been through more than you could _ever_ guess! _And_ she's our commanding officer on this mission!"

"Mission! Hah! Child's play is more like it, Demon!"

John roared and threw himself at Arbiter, sending sand flying everywhere on the silent mission back to Delta Halo. Their sergeant blinked over his shoulder at the tussling behemoths, shoving a newbie to keep moving and not to stare at something that was commonplace at this point. Once the kids were at the final rendezvous point and were piling aboard a Pelican, Johnson wearily told the pilot to come back in an hour, hopping nimbly off of the end of the troop-transport, taking his time walking back.

And wasn't shocked in the least to see that they were still fighting. Sitting upon a rock just behind a larger boulder, he waiting it out, hearing the curses and name-calling clearly, smirking at a few of the more inventive ones. Before a half-hour had passed, they were down to panting, cussing each other out while a good six feet apart. However, the swears exhausted themselves after a while, and silence prevailed. Johnson peeked around the boulder, seeing them staring at each other.

Arbiter spoke first, panting. "I will apologize to the female."

"Why didn't you blasted well give in before?"

"You wanted to fight."

"How would you have known that?"

"_I_ wanted to fight. And not in one of those metal training-rooms on the ship. Out here, where fights _should_ take place."

John sighed, relaxing to lay upon his back on the sand, hearing the Arbiter move to lean over him. "You're getting tired easier, Demon."

"I'm _sick_ of fighting. I never thought that I would say that, but I am." He sat up again, feeling more than seeing or hearing the Arbiter move to lean back-to-back with him. He pulled his helmet off, moving his fingers through slightly-longer-than-regulation hair that was beginning to gray in small areas. "And you're not as energetic, yourself."

"I will admit that I, too, am getting old. I had been merely a pilot before the campaign against you humans, but I rose quickly, and at the time of the discovery of the first Halo, I had been commanding a fleet for over the equivalent of five of your years."

"That long, huh?"

"You do not sound impressed."

"Not in the least, alien."

Arbiter chuckled for the first time in a long while, surprising his companion into his own rare chuckle. After a long silence, Arbiter asked a rather uncanny question. "What are normal relations between partners in your culture?"

"Hold up. What?"

"I could not ask anyone else. I am . . . slightly troubled by something."

John shrugged. "Depends upon what you mean."

"Answer, please?"

"Aah, well . . . blast, Arbiter, you ask tough questions when we get back to being civilized to each other." John sighed. "Normal relations?"

"Marriage relations."

Shrugging, John shook his head. "For over four thousand years, marriage was defined by the partnership between one man and one woman. Is that what you were asking about?"

"Possibly. But why are two menâ€"

"Oh, don't go there. We've had to talk to those two already to make sure they keep it down."

"That is normal in your culture!"

"Yeah. I don't see how, though. I . . ." he made a sound of slight disgust. "I can't fit my mind around how two . . . ugh, Arbiter. Ask a simple question, next time." Blinking, watching as the sun disappeared behind the ring, he lightly dug his elbow into the Elite behind him. "What about in your culture?"

"Never would two of the same gender even think about something like that. Marriage and mating are for the continuation of the species, for the completion of cycles of birthing and dying. Like this ring, in a sense."

"Were you married?"

"Yes. Once."

"Once? What happened?"

"I had become that which I opposed. She left me when the Mark of Shame was burned onto my chest."

"Did you have children?"

"One, but . . . my son died soon after birth, three years before Halo. I was on a mission, and I do not know what caused his death. I was never told."

"Did you ask?"

"Why would I have? In my culture it is the females who wish and pray for children; who rear them. If they are blessed to be born male, when they mature, their fathers take over their rearing." Arbiter looked over his right shoulder at the Spartan. "It is different, I am guessing, with your people."

"Both parents raise a child, or their children, regardless of gender."

"You have never been married."

"No."

"Had a special friend?"

A small smile flitted over John's face as he turned his head to look at the Elite. "That's almost prying."

"Curiosity."

"Geh." He looked back at the ringworld. "Once. And she was amazing."

Johnson could be heard cursing as he walked over the series of rocky sand dunes that separated the site of their impromptu sparring and the rendezvous point. The dark-skinned man roared, "Get your lazy butts moving! We're late!"

Jointly sighing, the two warriors stood, walking over the dune and following the Sergeant.

2. Chapter Two

Faith's Fury

> By: Sinead<p>

Author's Note: Holy. Crap. Six reviews in TWO days! I've never gotten something like THAT before! Hah! Wow . . . clears throat
Therefore, here are my thanks:_

Chewbaca, thank you! I try my hardest to get keep characters close to their personalities, but I often feel that I fall short._

Yumiko the hellbunny slayer . . . yeesh, I love your name! chuckles
Here's your update!_

Fhulhi the Crazy, I hope you find this to be as entertaining as the last chapter, and I hope that I don't disappoint any of you with it!_

Spacefan, first off, thanks for your reviews on "The Angel's Halo." There IS a sequel, and it is turning out to be longer than the first story. (((rereads review, snickers))) I like. Indeed, I like. Hah! Those parts you indicated were actually ones I wrote while sleep-deprived. Shows how my mind likes working. And for Johnson and his comments . . . well . . . you hafta figure that those two have a strange sorta friendship, having survived Halo and all . . . so I thought that I'd toss in a light line after a serious scene. Always (sometimes) works._

Lizardios, thanks for reviewing! Every little bit of affirmation and every comments helps me write faster! . . . I think, that is.

Dcastro, that's sharp of you to pick up on that! And classified information like that, soldier, is for the Brass to know, and the rest of us to guess at! (Meaning: I haven't decided.)

_Now! Enough of the yippity-yap! Get ready to dance, you pasty bastard! _â€" Sgt. Johnson, E3 Demo (I hope I got it right . . .)

* * *

><p>Chapter Two: Resenting the Reconciliation<p>

"Demon."

Turning, hitting the Elite, John fell back into slumber, lulled back to his unconscious haven by the fluent cursing.

But alas, his ankle was gripped in a firm hand, and he was dragged out of bed and out the hall by said grumbling Elite, dressed in only his boxers. Hearing tittering, he saw a female officer watching. Shooting her a glare and gripping the first hand-hold he could wrap his fingers around, he quickly got out of the Arbiter's grip and kicked the alien's left leg, stalking back to his rooms to get into some semblance of a uniform. His armor was in the shop, as it were, getting re-tuned and fixing a few minor glitches, and the clothing he had been given were slightly too loose-fitting, oddly, thus it felt plain weird to him. Why would they have clothing too big for him, anyway? Wasn't he _already_ one the tallest on this orbiting thing? Why would there be something slightly too long and wide?

Once in regulation clothing, he slammed the door open, snarled something quite obscene to the Elite, and started in the direction that he had been previously been dragged in. He didn't want to think of why the clothing didn't fit anymore. "Where are we going, and why did you wake me up that early."

"Commander Keyes wants a word with you. She did not tell me why."

"I'm going to shove a pistol up yourâ€""

"Morning, sir!" It was the female recruit, he noted, as she snapped to attention. "I wanted to ask you something about Halo, if you have a moment to spare."

Returning the salute, John replied, "All that I can say is already in the files."

"But, sirâ€""

"I'm late for a meeting that I didn't know about, no thanks to this walking target beside me. I'm sorry." He stormed off, leaving the Elite behind him to walk into the receiving-room that Miranda Keyes held. Johnson was beside her, and the Elite closed the door after they had entered. John looked from one to the other, then said, "Here as summoned, ma'am, sir."

"A notice came in concerning you. Please sit, Spartan," Keyes said evenly.

He did, the Elite finding a chair as well, sitting upon it cautiously. John didn't blame him. He had seen lesser chairs collapse beneath the lard-face. Keyes continued. "There are some . . . recruits in the main bay. They're awaiting a briefing upon all that you know and have dealt with on both Halos, and have the clearance to know it. These kids have been working with Elites as comrades for the last seven months, and have a unique bond with them, something your kind call the 'Brotherhood,' Arbiter."

"They have been given clearance into the Brotherhood?" Arbiter asked. "Odd."

"They're lead by one who calls himself 'Leader,' and is in white armor, missing half of his left jaws . . . er, mandibles," Johnson said. He shrugged. "Says that he knew you, and apparently doesn't know if you still live. He's down there, with an old Chief Petty Officer called Mendez. They were training this new group."

"Mendez is alive?" John hissed, leaning forward. His face lifted slightly into a small smile, but it disappeared. "You said he trained them?"

* * *

>Arbiter and the Master Chief walked in double-timed parade-measures to the main cargo bay. And once they saw who were residing there, they stopped dead. Elites of all ages were relaxing with humans, learning card games, telling stories, just genuinely at ease with their comrades. A sharp bark from their left caused everyone to jump to attention. Spartan-117 and Arbiter turned to see the two individuals who had trained these new troops. John barked, "At ease, back to what you were doing." <p>None of them really did, all watching their trainer and the one remaining Spartan-II. The Elites watched the Arbiter, who was matching the Spec-Ops Leader in a long stare that spoke to each other of many things.<p>

While they moved off a little way to catch up on current events, Mendez gave his old favorite a smile, his face older and worn with lines and creases. "These are the Spartan-IIIs, 117. These are the kids who will be taking your place, pick up where you left off. You're allowed to retire. This is not your fight any longer, not your responsibility." Sighing, the old man nodded a few times. "You did well, son. You've well-earned a long rest."

"Chief, with all due respect and more, I'm not ready to sit back just now. You have Spartan recruits? How well trained are they? Will they move like my Spartans did? Do the included Elites hinder or help? I want to find out." John grinned, a flash of his old personality and his inner child, the one that told him to just do what he did best, peeked out almost timidly. "Do I have an option to refuse retirement?"

Mendez looked the man over. He had seen this officer as a boy, raised him into a young man, sent him on his way when he and his Spartans were ready. And here he was again, facing this solemn warrior, seeing the restless and fearsome fighter rise up again within the Master

Chief's eyes. And smiled, nodding. "You, 117, are more than allowed to refuse retirement."

"Welcome back, sir," John said, saluting.

Mendez saluted in return, roaring out over the massed fighters, "Atten-_hut_! Chief Petty Officer, take over."

"Let's show this old war-dog what we're made of!" The Petty Officer, a young woman whose hair had completely silver streaks in it, seemed to stand out almost unnaturally.

"Who is she, Chief Mendez?"

"Your successor. Been hard-pressed to prove herself to Leader, here, who's used to an all-male command and military." Mendez's chiseled features cracked into a smirk. "And we've managed to pair each Spartan with an opposite-gender Elite. None of the males knew what had happened when females volunteered. I knew they had _some_ training; they moved differently than untrained females."

"And?" John asked, still watching the flurry of activity that the Spartan-IIIs and their Elite companions were making while they cleared the space.

"And they completely stunned the Leader."

"Who was paired with the girl?"

"The Leader's own son."

"Why male-female pairings?"

"They have this thing about not pairing two of the same gender together in a long-term relationship of any kind. You and the Arbiter are bordering on 'strange' to the Leader."

"I've heard something of their aversion to same-sex pairs."

"Explanation, Master Chief?"

"There's a . . . ah, alternate-lifestyle couple down the hall from him. He's somewhat disgusted, and can't seem to even talk to either of the men." John shrugged slightly. "Frankly, as long as they leave me alone, keep to their duties and military purposes, then I have no issue with them. They're good soldiers, know their duty, and don't cause a big fuss about being reprimanded."

"You've worked with them before."

"Five recon missions. Didn't suspect a thing until someone complained."

"Arbiter?"

"No. Some newbie girls at the end of the hall, three dorms down. He ended up asking me about that later on, once the issue was solved."

Mendez grunted his reply, watching as the Leader's son was intent upon a discussion while he and the Petty Officer were moving a bench. The door opened, and a tech looked at the Master Chief. "Sir, your new armor's ready."

"New armor?" John asked. "I wasn't informed."

"Ah. Well, ah, the Chief Mendez insisted that you wouldn't retire this early, and so an extra suit was brought up from planet-side. When you're ready, sir, it'll be in armory seven." The tech disappeared as if he had never been there.

John looked at a smirking Mendez. "Another one of your 'exercises,' Chief Mendez?"

"In a way, Master Chief."

John smiled, and made eye-contact with the female CPO, whose gaze was as steady as her motions. Nodding his chin up the slightest bit, he invited her up to join them, the Elite politely turning back to his work, only to be reprimanded by his father. He loped up to the Chief Mendez, the Master Chief Spartan 117, his father, the Arbiter, and his partner. John looked him over, and the Elite fought down a wave of revulsion, still not used to such scrutiny given by another male.

John saw this, and broke off his inspection abruptly, turning it to the girl with a swift eye, spending the same amount of time studying her as he did the Elite. He looked at Arbiter. "Well? What do you think?"

"Leader's son is known for speed and endurance. I have no quarrel with the pairing."

"That's not what I was asking for, you useless lard-bottomed, split-lipped idiot. I want to know what you think of the group in general."

Arbiter snarled a few insults referring to John's lineage, and again they were fighting.

Mendez watched in sheer amazement as the two tumbled off of the ten-foot drop to the floor below, sparring with ease and practiced movements, still yelling at each other. Leader blinked at his human friend. "What is this about?"

"They're showing the kids that even without his armor, the Master Chief is a formidable foe, who has more experience than they do. Arbiter isn't holding back. They're evenly matched in hand-to-hand." He tried not to grin too hard at the swearing.

"I believe that there is something else," the Leader's son said quietly.

"Something that an Elite would see?"

"Correct. The Arbiter is showing us that he trusts the De- ah, the Master Chief to spar and argue with him as he would with a blood-related brother. There is no malice in either of their motions." He watched for a few seconds more, then added, "I would not

be surprised if the revered Arbiter has already classified the Master Chief as a brother in his mind."

"I agree," Leader replied. "I confronted him about how they related to each other, and Arbiter didn't hesitate with his reply that they were brothers-in-spirit. The Master Chief just doesn't know the term, but he might learn of it soon."

"You almost called him the 'Demon' again," the Petty Officer said to her partner as she pulled her hair away from her face and up into a sharp ponytail.

"Old habits."

"So be it." She grinned. "And I'm seeing something else, too. Something that only a _woman_ would see, Chief."

Smiling, Mendez asked, "And what would that be, Petty Officer?"

She shrugged, seeing the fighting pair stop immediately, John pointing to one of her Spartans and their partner, telling them to spar. She smiled. Lian and the Elite they called Foro, a shortening of his name, were two of the best in hand-to-hand. The Master Chief wouldn't regret his choice. As he was watching those two, the Arbiter was indicating for two others to be sparring. Russ and Rantam. Sparring wasn't their specialty, but they were proficient. Arbiter would doubtlessly catch one or the other trying to take either a shortcut or making mistakes. Being told to shape up by an elder and obviously battle-hardened individual would do both of them more than enough good.

She smiled back at the man that had raised her. "They're showing off for the ladies."

* * *

>"So you were accepted into the Brotherhood without a hitch?" Arbiter asked the Petty Officer. <p>Ysabelle smiled, and nodded. "Even though I'm female, human, and already a part of a military group."<p>

John sat with the drinks, looking at the Leader's son. "So she's Ysabelle, and what do we call _you_?"

He smiled as Elites do. "My name is hard to say, but in your language it means First Scion."

"You're the eldest, then."

"Yes." He indicated his partner. "_She_, however, insists on calling me Junior, Sonny or Kid."

"Well, you are," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "But otherwise we call him Wuss, which is _part_ of his name. Mir'wustumee."

Snorting a small laugh, John looked at Ysabelle, and his face lifted into a proud smile. "You look like a rather pretty version of your father."

She barked a laugh, sitting back in the chair. "I should tell him

that one, Master Chief."

John stood, pacing around the room once, gathering his thoughts. "All right, enough of the small talk. What have your Spartans been trained in, and how long have you been training."

"Trained in everything that you have been, and in the last seven months we've been training with the Elites." She shrugged. "Other than that, I don't know what else to tell you. We have MJOLNIR, have been using it, and are currently waiting for an AI, even though I doubt we'll need it."

John shook his head. "You'll need it. Having Cortana on Halo was extremely effective, wonderfully amusing, and she could hack into Covenant databases and communications without them knowing that we could hear them, providing intel about their movements and what they were planning."

"I still don't think . . ." Shrugging again, she finished with, "Well, I haven't worked with one, so I don't know how it is fighting in battle with them."

Arbiter looked at Mir'wustumee. "What was your specialty?"

"Learning to lead, sniping, hacking."

"There is another."

"Was, once. When I was younger. Pranking." And the younger Elite gave him a ferocious grin.

Arbiter wished he could hide. He knew this boy. He knew the pranks. He wasn't looking forward to them being revived. "Let us hope that you have finished with those days."

"Father was rather stern about my not pranking any of the humans. Said that they're touchy about those things sometimes."

John looked over. "By 'pranking,' what are you referring to?"

Ysabelle barked a laugh. "I warn you in advance, sir, that you did ask."

3. Chapter Three

Faith's Fury

> By: Sinead<p>

Author's Note: So things are looking up with this small story! More reviews! Hahahaha! Anyway, I'd like to thank those who are reading it, and I hope that you're pleased with what you're reading, and I have to say that there are a few more chapters upcoming soon with this one. Also, I'll soon start posting up the sequel for "The Angel's Halo," which is titled, "The Seraph's Broken Wings." I really am enjoying writing it, and I hope that those of you who have read "Angel's Halo" will like "Broken Wings." Now for the thanks! Oh, and even though these are personalized, I kindly ask that you read all of them, so that you have even that bit more of an edge upon how and why

I write what I do. Thanks again!_

Nightdragon0, thanks for the review! I hope that you read this chapter as well, but I can't say why since I'd then be spoiling it, and I simply hate spoiling surprises. The new "alliance" will show its head again soon in the next chapter.

_Fhulhi the Crazy, thanks again for reviewing! The next few chapters are a bit more low-key, but I'll try to shove in a few more "amusing" parts as soon as I can. Oh, sorry, have an amusing chapter beginning! I completely forgot about it . . . which kinda scares me . . .
._

Spacefan, sorry to disappoint you, but there aren't going to be many pranks as of yet. Truth be told, I'm horrible at pranking people. I can't keep a straight face. And thank you for your comment upon them having that "naturalness" about them. It means that I've now gotten a sense of who I want the characters to be.

Sharpshooter one two five, thank you for reviewing, and awaiting for more! Okay, and now to reply to the review. If you've read "Fall of Reach," then you'll see that an Elite has the same strength of the Master Chief in his Mark V armor. Possibly more, even. So it was an even match. As for the slight-OCC-ness, well . . . call it artistic development. Eric Nylud put in a few quirks in the MC that we really didn't see in the games. And remember Cortana's comment, "You look nice," with Chief's reply, "Thanks." He's human under it all! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

* * *

><p>Chapter Three: Understating a Commitment<p>

"What was that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying . . ."

"No. Ew. Not happening. I mean, _look_ at him . . ."

"I dare you."

"I bet she won't. She's scared."

"I'm not scared, you guys. I just don't want to."

"Aw, c'mon. He looks like he could use a good . . ."

High, feminine giggling resulted at the completion of the sentence. Arbiter glanced at the Master Chief, who was facing away from the recruits in the mess hall. He glanced up at the Elite. "Yeah, I know they're talking about me."

"They're more lust-filled than _Elite_ females. Somehow, that almost scares me . . ."

John snorted, seeing Ysabelle and her partner walk in to sit to the Arbiter's right, trays filled with food. She looked at the Chief, who was picking at the remainder of his dinner. "Something wrong?"

"Recruits being morons again. Nothing serious."

"Oh . . . uh . . ." She cleared her throat, indicating with a glance that the girl had been duped into coming over.

The young woman sat beside John, her uniform top unzipped enough to be suggestive without revealing too much of an ample bosom. Her hair was down from the regulation bun they had to wear it in, and she leaned forward slightly as if to give him a better look down the uniform jacket. "So. I heard you sleep alone."

Arbiter was trying not to snicker. Mir looked away, not really liking this girl, while Ysabelle leaned around Arbiter to get a better look at the Marine. John sighed, putting his drink down and looking at her eyes from the corner of his own. "Don't even try."

"Aww, but . . ."

"Don't." His voice was icy, commanding. "There's only one woman in this universe that I love."

"Surely she wouldn't know . . . so it'll be all right, won't it?"

Striving to keep his patience, he looked her completely eye-to-eye. "No. Get back to your friends."

At that moment, however, one of the men that Arbiter couldn't really face came over, sitting across from the Chief. "Sir, they're at it again in Command. Another recon mission. Same place as last time."

The girl rolled her eyes, making a sound of disgust. "Don't you have your boyfriend to bang?"

"Add a 'sir' to that, recruit," the man snarled back. "And cover up what others clearly have no desire for. You're in the Marines, girl, act it. Toughen up or die."

She stood, glaring at the group. "Fine. Freaks."

"Insubordination, is it?" an chilling voice asked. They looked over to see Commander Keyes there, glaring at the young woman. "Do as your Corporal says to. And if I hear that you're not meeting regulation standards, it's back to boot with you. Move it."

Saluting, the girl left, doing as her Commander said to. Miranda sat beside the Corporal. "Heard you've been playing nice in the sandbox again, Chief, Arbiter."

"Hah," was the dual reply.

She looked at what Ysabelle was inhaling, and the Spartan grinned, swallowing and shoving her plate closer to the Commander. "Whatever you want, Ma'am, you can have."

"No thanks, Spartan. I was just wondering what they're feeding you. Personally, I don't know how you can inhale stuff like this without flinching and gagging."

"Could be worse," Mendez grumbled, sitting to John's left. "Could be Johnson's cooking."

"I _heard_ that!"

"With all due respect, sir, you can shove it."

The Sergeant walked over, sitting with them and next to Commander Keyes. "The respect is _astounding_ these days, Mendez."

"Upstart. Deal with it. You've done so before."

"Hey," Ysabelle interrupted. "You'll never guess what Master Chief said."

"Do I _want_ to know, is the question," Mendez replied, eyeing his poorly-made quesadilla before taking a large bite from it, chewing twice, and swallowing. He took a long draft from his canteen to try to clear the taste from his mouth.

"Said that I looked like a rather pretty version of you."

Mendez coughed, looking up at a stiff-backed blushing Spartan-II. He had never seen this particular Spartan blush before, and none of his first Spartans had _ever_ blushed that hard. Miranda hid a smile with her hand at the look on John's face while the Corporal looked from Ysabelle to Mendez. "Well . . . he's right. There's a big family resemblance between you two."

Mir'wustomee barked a short laugh, and Miranda Keyes stood. "I'm sorry, Chief, but . . ." She giggled a little. "Your face is priceless. I'll see you at tonight's meeting."

Sighing, John shook his head, standing, picking his tray up. Mendez looked up at him. "Where do you think you're going, son?"

"Anywhere away from you and your daughter, that's where."

* * *

>He ended up in what he thought had been an empty, well-lit room. Upon walking a few steps deeper, he saw that Arbiter made it there before him. And Ysabelle. He turned to leave again, sighing.<p><p>

"Wait, please?" came the female Spartan's voice.

He turned. "Yeah?"

"Who was that one woman you spoke of?"

John was silent for a long time. When he spoke again, it was softly, mournfully. "Someone who isn't alive anymore. A woman who was one of us."

"When did she pass on?"

"Reach."

Ysabelle sighed. "I'm sorry. I . . ."

"You didn't know. So it isn't your fault that you're a Spartan, thus curious."

She smiled, looking back at the last Spartan-II. And heard the ship-wide com come to life. "Master Chief, Arbiter, please report to the bride _immediately_."

She made it easy for him to quit the short conversation by leaving the room before they did, briefly resting a compassionate hand upon his elbow as she passed him. He looked at the Elite, then turned and went in the opposite direction, the alien keeping pace beside him with considerable ease. "Why are we always grouped together?"

"Dunno. Don't care, as long as you behave."

"_Me_? You flatter yourself, human."

They arrived, and Commander Keyes met them at the door. "You'll want to see this."

"Where are we?" John asked.

"Reach."

Way to bring up bad memories, Commander, John thought. He followed her to a console, listening as she explained, "We were doing a fly-by, using Reach as a nav-point, when there was a coded burst-transmission. Our AI, Razeel, couldn't crack it, so he handed it to Cortana, who came up with this."

It started off with a hissing crackle, then seven notes, a pause, and the same seven notes again.

John sat, gripping the arm of the chair, his hands feeling weak for the very first time. His mouth pulled up into the smallest of smiles, his voice a soft wistful whisper. "Olly-olly-ox-in-free. There's one of mine down there."

He laughed, his relief completely evident to the crew around him, who couldn't understand any little thing about what was going on. Cortana appeared in the spare holotank, her features pulled up into a smile. "I also compared vocal ranges with the known Spartans, since this wasn't tagged and you all have voice-prints on file."

"You've been hacking again."

"With good purpose. It's Tyr."

John's head snapped around to look at the AI. Cortana smiled, looking to Keyes, speaking to the Commander with the ease of knowing her for over a year. "So. We can bring this lard-butted lady down there, or . . ."

Keyes started into orders. "Ready a Pelican. I want a landing team on that bird."

"All due respect Ma'am," John interrupted, his gravelly voice cutting through the murmurings, "I'd like to only take Spartans and Elites

down. We don't know what might be down there."

"Permission granted."

John turned on his heel and left the room. Arbiter blinked once, turning back to fix almost a mournful stare upon Miranda and Cortana. "Who is this 'she' you were referring to? I know she is one of the Demon's ilk, however . . . why do I not feel as if this is a normal Spartan?"

The AI smiled. "You'll find out when you see her. Catch up with him. I can't go planetside just yet, and he needs _some_ voice of reason around him."

Chuckling, the Elite bowed slightly, following the footsteps of the man he still hated.

* * *

>"Yssa, you land this thing."<p><p>

"Aye, sir."

Ysabelle took over, and John in his new MJOLNIR Mark-VII armor walked to the back of the Pelican, holding to a bar across the top of what would be the opening at the backside of the troop-transport. Mir and Arbiter were talking in low tones, their voices blending together in their native tongue. Along with them were the others of Alpha Team; hand-to-hand artists Lian and Foro, long-range snipers Trissa and Lar, and finally the demolitions specialists Russ and Rantam.

They landed, unloading swiftly and near-silently in the clearing. This had been the site of the transmission. John walked over to the device, seeing it scan him, knowing that it would catch his f-o-f tag and forward it to its maker. He waited a long moment before the Spartan-II walked out of the bushes, seeing the Elites and Spartan-IIIs standing in a loose defensive formation. She looked at John warily from behind her golden blast shield.

John held his hand back behind him at an angle, his motion telling the others to stay put while he opened a private line to his Elite partner. "Arbiter, none of your crap. She doesn't need to see you attack me. She'll berserk. Understand?"

He turned his head enough to see the grey-armored Elite nod slightly. Slowly, he pulled his own helmet off, revealing his face. She did the same, her violet eyes catching his blue ones. With a muted cry, she ran to him, wrapping her arms around his chest while he sighed, holding her shoulders. "It's over, Spartan. Welcome home, Tyr."

"John . . ."

She collapsed unconscious into his arms, and he picked her up effortlessly, balancing her considerable armor-enhanced weight easily. "Arbiter, please get the helmets."

"You asked me not to start a fight with you. Why?"

"Because you need her trust. She'll not let you remotely near me if

she doesn't trust you." John chuckled. "Tyr is an amazing woman. The second-fastest, best with every hand-to-hand technique she could get someone to teach her, and her favorite weapon is a combat knife." He looked at Lian and Foro. "If you ask nicely, she might let you learn from her."

Once they were back upon the Amber Clad, John carried her to the medical bay, ignoring the stares he got from the Marines and Navy personnel. Arbiter walked before him, his mere presence causing people to back away, while Ysabelle and Mir followed behind. Once there, John sat Tyr upon a bed, resting her weight against him while he started to pull off the old Mark-V armor. Ysabelle would have helped, yet Arbiter touched her arm, not moving much. His voice was soft. "We will be waiting in the Spartans' hangar."

"Thanks," was the terse, clipped reply.

Arbiter nodded once, then ushered the others out the door. John looked over his shoulder to see that the Elite was still watching him, and stopped removing the shoulder-plating of the old, olive metal. The Arbiter bowed his head slightly towards the Master Chief, who was quick to do the same. And then he was gone.

John returned to his task.

* * *

>A day later, he was out of his armor and dozing in a chair next to Tyr's bed. The moment he heard her stir, he sat up and reached over to rest his hand upon her own. She looked up at him. "You came. I didn't dream it."<p><p>

"You think that I wouldn't come? Were there any others with you?"

"No."

John sighed, then reached over to brush his fingers along her cheek. "You haven't lost any of your charm, I hope."

"I have charm?"

"You've always had it."

"I've never heard you say that, though."

John chuckled, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. "Because I was too enthusiastic about what trouble we were getting up to, that's why."

"We were only kids . . ."

"I hope it hasn't changed," he whispered, his face concerned.

"Why didn't you come before?" she asked, changing the subject.

"I didn't know that only half of Reach was glassed."

"You assumedâ€"

"I had no time to come back, Tyr. We made a blind jump."

Tyr's eyes overflowed, and her silver hair fell back into her face when she rolled her head towards her commanding officer . . . her old lover. "I missed you so much."

He cradled Tyr's head in his arms, resting his forehead right before her ear, whispering, "I've never missed anyone more than I've missed you."

"Stay with me?"

"I will. As long as you let me get food from time to time."

"That's permitted."

"Better be. I out-rank you."

She chuckled dryly.

4. Chapter Four

Faith's Fury

> By: Sinead<p>

**Author's Note:** My, but people are loving this story! Personally, when I first started it, I hadn't many aspirations to continue it. It was supposed to be a one-shot, and even THEN . . . Hah. See what reviews get you! INSPIRATION, WATSON, INSPIRATION! Ahem. Anyway, the romance continues. That's all you're getting for spoilers on this one! And I think that I'll start saying who my favorite character for each chapter is . . . I think that it would make it more interesting. So here's the small chart so far for favoritesâ€" Chapter One: Tie between Arbiter and the Master Chief; Chapter Two: Mir'wustomee; Chapter Three's favorite was somewhat of a tie between Ysabelle and Tyr. This chapter's favorite is Arai! Now, on with the review-replies:

_Fhulhi the Crazy, you'd better BET that it's turning into a romance. That's all I'm blasted good at writing! Romances and tearjerkers! . . . wait . . . crap, I hope that this doesn't turn into a tearjerker . . . that would suck . . . _

Spacefan, I actually think that he's going to be rather overly sweet on Tyr . . . and by everything that's even semi-holy, I hope he doesn't screw up with keeping her his girlfriend! And what do you mean, "Human females more lustful than Elite females? Hah! That's a good one . . ." ! C'mon, seriously! I'm a WOMAN (if you have not guessed already) and I know how blasted lustful we can get! Heh, sure it's not the typical reaction that guys get when they're thinking about whatever turns them on and all, but it's still there, subtly chipping away at the walls of sanity and screaming, "Hel-LO! Male! Over there! Good body! . . . VERY good body . . . oooh . . . I wonder . . . hehehehehe . . ." Somehow I doubt that Elite femmes have the same reaction. They'd be more civilized about the entire thing. . . . either that or Arbiter has no clue about the opposite gender in the least.

_Sharpshooter one two five, don't worry about having a different

perception of the Master Chief. We all think of him in different ways, and I can tell that just by the way people write about him. I look for the man under the mask, under the armor. The real soul that resides in a shadowed place that not many people would be able to see. And I'm stopping there before I begin ranting in pure fangirl fashion!_

Mephisto138, thanks for reviewing! And don't worry, you'll see more of those two in Chapter Five. This one is dedicated to another cause, but one just as important.

Yomiko the hellbunny slayer returns again! Thanks for the review! I hope you keep reading, and I hope that you like these next two chapters!

Nightdragon0, you're right on the money. Not only will Arbiter have to deal with watching this . . . well, the Japanese called them "hitokiri" . . . this manslayer in his Covenant-influenced eyes and try to find out how EXACTLY he can love when he's been an icon of hate since the very beginning. And you'll see some of how that's dealt with in this chapter. Enjoy!

* * *

><p>Chapter Four: Relearning Patience<p>

Arbiter smiled at the pair of Spartan-IIs, neither of them knowing he was watching. John and this Tyr have long been friends and lovers, he surmised from the way they spoke with each other. As soon as he heard their voices and saw gazes turn into a more intimate discourse, he turned, almost embarrassed to see the Demon smiling tenderly to this woman. The Elite walked away from the door, only to complete his fifteenth step and face Leader. The white-clad Elite bumped his shoulder against Arbiter's, physically reaffirming their bond as brothers, saying aloud, "So his mate is back with him?"

"Quite so."

"You sound almost disappointed."

Arbiter didn't reply. Chuckling, Leader understood the predicament. "You'll find the right mate for you soon enough, Arbiter. She's out there."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I keep faith that my mate is out there."

Arbiter looked at Leader, the unsaid words about how Leader's wife left him because of his missing left jaw hanging between them. Not to mention that arbiter himself had once had a mate who had loved him ardently . . . and left him when he had needed her love and support the most. Leader sighed. "A new mate, Arbiter. One who cares not about physical afflictions. One who cares for what the male is _inside_."

"No female would elope with a heretic," Arbiter said bitterly. "And especially not one whose first mate left him."

"You're a good friend, Arbiter, a good younger brother to me. Your

faith and devotion for keeping and upholding a friendship shows that you made a good mate before and you will be a good mate again in the future. There will be one for you. Elites are not meant to live a solitary life, and I have heard many who know not of our relation and have said around me that they wish to have the honor of sharing a bed with you." Leader glanced at the younger Elite. "Even though I know fully that you care not for those types of relationships. But you are, by far, nowhere near the most undesirable of those around us."

Arbiter sighed, resting his hand upon the armor over the Mark of Shame. "I wish I could share your hope for a mate, brother. I really do."

Leader's shoulders sagged the slightest bit, and he walked closer beside the Arbiter until the armor over their shoulders brushed. "You have always been my blood-brother. I was wrong when I said to you that your life didn't matter to me. I was angry that they accused you of something that was beyond your control, and did not have an outlet."

"I never blamed you for your words, brother. Never," was the hushed reply.

They were silent until they got to the Spartans' hangar, where a roiling argument was in full-swing if either of them were judging it right from the voices alone. They entered, seeing three unfamiliar Elites facing Alpha team, the remainder of the Spartans and the Brotherhood around the edges of the room, silently supporting their leaders.

Mendez walked in after the two Elites, muttering, "Know what this is about?"

Leader shook his head before taking a deep breath in and bellowing, "_What is the meaning of this_!"

Every voice fell silent immediately, and the three Elites turned. One male, two female. The male spoke. "We have been requesting to meet with you, Leader, for the past _hour_."

"Oh?"

"They would not allow us to meet with you where _you_ were."

"Don't twist words," Mir'wustomee snarled.

Suppressing a glare, the male clarified, "The . . . _human_ told me that you were somewhere upon this ship, and would not let us search."

Ysabelle snorted. "I told you that you were welcome to wait here with us until Leader returned. He was in a meeting with Commander Keyes and Chief Mendez. If they were disturbed, Leader would not be at all pleasant, regardless of who you are."

The females were looking disgusted at the male's behavior. Arbiter removed his helmet, walking off. This wasn't his issue. Leader understood that, and Arbiter could tell that by the loose way that he was standing. What he didn't notice was that one of the Elite females

watched him as he started pulling the rest of his armor off while he was walking away.

Leader looked between the three Elites, once the female looked back at him. Her voice was modulated and soft, showing a thoughtful, brooding personality. "Is that the Arbiter?"

Leader saw the Elite stop and look back over his shoulder once to identify the voice before continuing to the room he had been offered so that he would be among his people. The elder brother nodded. "Yes. My brother."

The Elite female bowed gracefully. "I am honored to meet you, Leader. Myself and my younger sister asked our brother to bring us here to train under you, as I hear that you are accepting females into a new and changed Brotherhood. I sent you a message two standard weeks ago."

Gesturing to one of the youngest Elites for his datapad, he looked at the females while he waited. "Names?"

"Jira'kirene is my name. My sister's name is Kidafan'asha. My brother is Ghet'sivaamee."

The barely-four-foot Elite youngster, his eldest grand-daughter at the age of seven, came up with the datapad, awaiting more orders. He rested his right hand upon the young head, his main thumb on his left hand tapping keys to scroll downward through the messages received in the last three human weeks. Finally, he came to a message, opening it and rereading it silently before closing it and turning off the datapad. "Arai, if you would please stay with me?"

"Yes, grandfather."

Smiling at her kindly, he handed her the small computer, saying to the grown females, "You're in. Ysabelle, assign them bunks with the other females once I'm done interviewing them." He looked at the male. "Ghet'sivaamee, I thank you for escorting two new recruits into my care. They will be protected and looked after."

In a clear dismissal, he turned, his grand-daughter Arai'shivaana right upon his heels, eager to please her grandfather. The two females fell into step behind him, and he said over his shoulder, "Your human comrades will undoubtedly shorten your name, so please do not take it as an offence. It is a sign of endearment with them, and is oft used as a handhold in creating friendships." He looked beyond them, yelling, "Ysabelle! Mir'wustumee! Did I not tell you to follow!"

"Actuallyâ€" Ysabelle started, laughing, jogging to catch up.

Leader pushed open the door to the Arbiter's room, seeing him pull a loose-fitting casual robe over his lean, muscled body prior to turning to face them. The Mark of Shame was seen briefly before the robes settled again. "Leader."

"An interview." He looked at Arai. "Hand me that, please." She did, clasping her hands together nervously before her great-uncle swept her up into his arms, sitting upon the desk and handing her a treat.

Leader sighed. "You're going to spoil her."

"Hah. She deserves it," Arbiter replied. "Especially after having a stiff grandfather like you."

The two females chuckled, easing up a bit before remembering that a human was still in the room. Ysabelle smiled, then heard the door open again. John's voice said, "I was told by Mendez that there were two new recruits."

Jira'kirene and Kidafan'asha jointly swallowed, and John instantly knew that they had been threatened by their parents with stories as children that if they didn't behave, "I'll leave you out for the Demon to take you!"

He walked over to Arbiter, smiling and accepting the small Elite who was squirming to get from the Elite into the human's arms for spoiling. John chuckled and let her sit upon one broad shoulder, tickling her foot. She squealed with giggles, trying not to fall off, and John stopped so that he could set her down. "You've grown again."

"That's not what Mom says," Arai mumbled. "She says that she was already bigger than I am when she was my age." The young Elite looked up at the human. "Will I ever be as big as you and Grand-Uncle and Grandfather when I grow up?"

John crouched, replying, "Dunno. But if you're smaller, then you can also fight a bit better. You'll be faster than the taller ones, and there won't be as much of you to hold on to!" With that, he picked her up again, tossing her safely to Arbiter, who tickled her and then embraced her warmly.

Leader shook his head. "After years of combat and killing my kind, Master Chief, it is odd for me to see you handle a child of my lineage with such gentleness."

John smiled. "People change. But remember that she hasn't tried to kill me; you have."

"Yes, yes, I remember, Demon."

"No more of a demon than you are."

They returned their attention to the two females when Arai's mother walked into the room stiffly, seeing her daughter squirm out of Arbiter's grasp and back over to latch upon John's waist. He picked her up again, letting her climb to sit on his shoulders. She looked to her mother, who looked at her own father to say, "All right, as long as she's with you. I have some business to take care of with that lazy mate of mine."

And she was gone again. Jira'kirene looked at Leader. "You're not as old as you're said to be."

"No. I had my daughter the year I had been mated on my seventeenth year, and my son three years later. She was mated seven years ago, upon her seventeenth year. This is her eldest daughter."

She tallied up the years. "You're only forty-one!"

"And my mate left me six years ago," he said sadly, "so I may never grow old with her."

He shrugged, looking at his son, seeing the pride there. There was something about that pride . . . something that said that his son wanted to talk with him after the meeting. As quickly as he could, but keeping polite all the way through, he ran through the rules and then gave them training schedules, sending them off with Ysabelle for a tour. Arbiter and John would bring his now-sleeping grand-daughter back to her mother and father. Mir'wustumee stayed behind.

"Well, my son, tell me what it is that is bothering you."

"I wish to gain some wisdom upon a hard subject."

"I'm listening."

"I think love someone."

"May I ask who?"

He saw his son swallow before answering. "A human."

Leader didn't know what to say. He kept his face expressionless, sorting his mind out in quick order. His Elite son . . . his only son, loved a human woman. All right. Who, and then why. "Who is she?"

"Yssa."

Leader nodded slowly. "Does she know?"

"I . . . I don't know. I don't know what to do. I don't know their customs for courtingâ€"

"Hold there."

Mir fell into an embarrassed silence.

Leader paced the length of his brother's room, not touching anything as he came to a stop before the glorious filigreed silvery armor resting reverently, nostalgically, upon a standard armor-rack. "You say you love her."

"Yes."

He studied the helmet, then moved slightly to look at the chestplate, seeing how it must weigh much more than the modern armor. A burden to be the Arbiter, it always seemed to be. A burden to wear the mask of an Arbiter over a broken heart. A burden it was to live with the Burn of the Mark of Shame. Yet his brother still tried to stand tall despite all the weight resting upon him. If only his brother's strength could help him find out how to deal with this. "Why? Why do you love her?"

"She's so . . . real. She started word-sparring with that Ghet'sivaamee. She didn't care that he was almost twice her size, that he could have pulled a sword out at the slightest inclination. She intimidated him into his terminating the argument with her,

instead taking it up with me." Mir sighed. "Remember that I had been burned badly by plasma six months before we met with Uncle and the Chief. She didn't leave my side at all. You used that as a reference to show how the partners should work with one another. When everyone was asleep at night, when I couldn't sleep . . . she was always there. She . . . she held my unburned hand. She soothed me in a way that not even Mother could have by being there, by touching my face and resting cool fingers upon my forehead when I was fevered. Yssa . . . is . . ." He collapsed into a chair. "She is something I cannot describe, Father."

Small answers always helped. Small steps a child took before learning to run. Leader rested his hand upon his son's shoulder. "How would you court an Elite?"

"Small words of kindness. Showing her places and things that were pleasing to the eye. Small gifts that have meaning."

"You missed something."

"I know."

"Asking the parent if you might court her."

Silence overcame the two. Finally, Mir shook his head. "Blast it, but the old Chief would never allow me to be with her."

"You don't know that. There are a lot of things you have been overlooking, son."

Rebellious eyes looked up at the father, and Leader sat where his brother had not an hour past. The younger Elite said aggressively, "Really. And those are . . . ?"

"She knows. She's spoken to her father, and both of them spoke to me. She asked me a great many things about our culture."

Mir lowered his gaze, ashamed again. His emotions were upon a rampage. He didn't know what to do, how to do it, or even how to handle this almost-overwhelming affection he felt for Ysabelle. Leader reached over and tipped his son's chin up again, looking into the eyes that were almost a mirror of his own. "She understands that to be mated is generally for procreative purposes. That to show interest is considered a very serious matter."

"You will not allow it, you're saying."

Leader didn't answer for a long moment. The Arbiter had to face trials of many sorts; his brother had taken them in stride . . . even though it had been a stride that limped almost too slightly to be seen or detected. How to deal with this, then? He hadn't the same spirit as Arbiter. They were two separate people, two separate ways of thinking, but both would always come back to the same answer. That had been proven when both had teamed up with the humans to defeat the corruption that was otherwise called the Covenant.

But that had really been the beginning of it, hadn't it? His son had always seemed to be rebellious, not taking orders to their full extent. He never killed a human. He never killed unless it was necessary. Arbiter had been the same.

An arbiter . . . a go-between . . . a mediator . . . a peacemaker.

His son had the spirit of an Arbiter. He had the inclination for peace that an Arbiter usually portrayed. Mir'wustomee was not one who cared about what a person was, but who. He loved one that wasn't Elite. He loved one who loved him in return. He loved someone who had the same peace-loving attributes that he portrayed, but would kill for their friends and family. He loved . . .

By the holiest of all the rings . . .

He loved his soul-mate. She was the reflection in his spirit-mirror. Ysabelle was Mir'wustomee in female and human form; Miur'wustomee was Ysabelle in male and Elite form. They were the two halves of one blade.

Looking back at his son, speaking in a hushed voice that was reverent of just how deep this bond must lie with them, he said, "No. I tell you that I approve of it."

"Wh-what?"

"You and she are well-attuned to each other. You have something that not many who love each other have, and I will explain that to Mendez. Remember that I said that 'to be mated is generally for procreative purposes,' my son. There are Elites who were mated because they loved each other. Sometimes a pair who were mated found out that one or the other were sterile. Myself and my brother were raised by one such couple. They took us in and raised other orphans beside us." Sighing, smiling and gently shoving his son to stand, Leader turned him in the direction of the door. "Go. Find her. Tell her. She wants to know the truth. Get to her before she hurts."

Mir ran to find the woman he loved.

5. Chapter Five

Faith's Fury

> By: Sinead<p>

Author's Note: **Special Notice!** I won't be able to update this story regularly for a short while. I'm going to be attending an art fair in two weeks, and then Anime Boston at the end of the month, and I have two costumes to finish, since I'm a severe procrastinator! Favorite character of the update: dually between Yssa and Mir. Why? Because I like their reactions in a certain situation. Oh, and I upped the rating simply because of the subject matter being something that younger teens shouldn't need to read and/or have to process. To clarify the events later on, and even one event previous to this, I have nothing against homosexuals. Not to say that anything happens to anyone, but I didn't want someone stumbling into reading something that they didn't need to read about too early. Two of my best friends are either lesbians or bisexual, and I work with a gay man who's so sweet and dear. It's their choice, and I respect them still, however, I'm kinda on the conservative side . . . and I don't agree. I love them dearly for who they are anyway, and I guess that I'm just getting something outta my system. Writing does that for me. But read

on!_

Spacefan, if you thought that was the end . . . check again. Because there's more, baby! HAH-hahahaha! Whoo . . . and there's more love on the way! . . . well, in a little while.

Nightdragon0: Yeah, sometimes I do, but I'm putting this from almost a human's perspective, with a few insights into Arbiter and Leader. Speaking as a human, the name I've been hearing the species being called for over three years has been "Elites." Their formal name, "Sangheili," is somewhat more difficult to remember. But I'll try to edge it in soon, I promise!

Haha! Yes, Fhulhi the Crazy, I agree. I didn't expect Arai to be that endearing, but she has a way of idolizing her grandfather that I can't help but love! Thanks for the review!

DarkSeto, you're correct. She was, but heh . . . can you seriously leave her alone without her getting into trouble? Let's just say that Chief went back sometime before this story and brought her back. I might just write a prologue!

Yomiko the hellbunny slayer, are you as big a sucker for romance as I am? (I'm grinning evilly on this end, just so you know!)

Bass GSX, thanks for the review! Updates will most likely be slow either due to my work schedule changing, New England weather patterns, the library computers not working, or a combination of all three, but I'll keep this story coming as quickly as I possibly can! Thank you for the review!

* * *

><p>Chapter Five: A Sacred Promise<p>

John was talking with Ysabelle and showing her a few team-leader command signals when he saw the Elite rush to them, skidding to a halt and blinking. Seeing him pause for breath and thought scratched at a surface in John's mind, and he instantly knew what the alien needed: a talk alone with Ysabelle. The Master Chief looked at the Petty Officer. "I'll show you what I mean later. Tyr should be awake by now and wondering why I'm taking so long to get food."

Ysabelle laughed, and shooed the older man off imperiously. Once he was gone, she looked at her partner, not asking anything for a long while, just watching his face, letting him watch hers. Finally, he spoke. "I wish to talk to you in private."

She nodded, turned, and they went to her quarters. Fortunately, Mir'wustomee thought, everyone was used to seeing them go off to a place on their own to talk. They were used to seeing Ysabelle enter Mir's room to wake him up or to ask him something. Thankfully, too, they were used to him entering her quarters with either food or an assignment, or to discuss plans for a mission.

She sat upon her bed, looked up at the Elite, then whispered, "Something's wrong."

Her partner-in-crime, as it were, shook his head, coming to kneel before her and wrap his arms around her waist. He sighed into her

shoulder, replying, "No. Something is very _right_."

Mir had never hugged her before. Ysabelle moved so that she could tip his face up to look into his eyes. "What, then? Tell me."

"I spoke with my father. I . . . I asked for his wisdom on something."

"You rarely get a chance to do that."

"I know. I talked with him all this time."

"And he hasn't killed you yet? I'm impressed."

"Please, Yssa, no jokes."

She smiled, and asked, "What did you talk to him about?"

"You."

The Spartan blinked. Her? What about her? Wait. That look . . . that meant that he had found out a secret that hadn't seen light yet. He had that look about two months ago when he found out that Lian and Russ had been bed-partners for over two years, and then when he managed to set the Elites known as Lar and Rantam up on a date that had progressed into what he called a "fulfilling." She didn't ask what that would mean in their syntax. She didn't think that she wanted to know.

But what had he found out this time? What would make him embrace her like that? It sure as anything wasn't a chaste embrace between siblings. More like an embrace that promised something a bit deeper than being simple friends with benefits.

Then it hit her.

"You know, then," she whispered.

"I know what?"

"That I love you."

Mir'wustomee nodded.

Sighing, Ysabelle tried to stand, but he held her where she was. She sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. I can't sit still while you tell me that it's unacceptable that I hold affection for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Junior, I _know_ that you probably love someone of your own kind! Don't _fool_ with me like this!"

"Fool with you? Why do you say that? I'm not fooling with you. I'm not pranking you. If I was, Yssa, you would have known by now. You know my style."

"Let me go. Please. You . . . you . . ."

The Elite gave her his best smile. "I will admit to you that I am

deeply, ardently in love with someone."

"Stop . . ."

"I will not. You need to know this. I love her with everything that I am, that I will be."

"Please, Mir, don't . . ."

"Do you know who she is?"

Ysabelle was crying at this point, Mir'wustomee noticed, and he moved to wipe the tears. Her voice shook. "No. Why would I know? You keep that part of your heart hidden even from your best friends. From those who've you claimed as a brother or a sister. But why haven't you called me your sister? Why haven't you ever referred to me as family? We've been close ever since we met. Don't you approve of me? Has all this been a lie?" She tried shoving him away again, but she was weak in her distress. While she talked, her voice still cracked with emotion. "How can I measure up to your standards? What can I do so that I can be acceptable to you to call me your sister? To let me call you my brother?"

In contrast, the Elite's voice was filled with warmth, with laughter, with love. "You are beyond any standards that I have for any of my Elites, for any of your Spartans. You are acceptable to me, but not as my sister. Tell me something. Can you humans be mated to your own kin?"

She sniffed, tears rolling faster down her cheeks. "What?"

"Can you marry a brother?"

"No . . ."

"Then there is your answer. There is your answer."

"You . . . you want to . . . to . . ."

"Please forgive me for rushing this, but will you . . . could you possibly even . . ."

Words fell away from Ysabelle's mind. All that she could remember was that he was there, asking her something so deep and profound that all she could do was nod mutely, smiling, crying, feeling his hands brush at her cheeks, holding her closer to cradle her upon his lap while she held onto his robes, pressing them to her face to hide the tears. Chuckling, the Elite whispered, "I am sorry that I spoke in circles and upset you so, but I had to tell you how I felt towards you. And I have one more question to ask you."

Sniffing, Ysabelle Mendez looked up at the one she would marry, her face still wet and shining from the tears. "Yeah?"

"Mind if we share a bed tonight?"

Snickering, she pushed him, knowing that was a common invitation for an Elite male to ask a female if she would consider bedding them. And she was planning to make him pay for asking, too. "My bed or yours?"

He laughed, reaching up to hold her close. They simply laid beside each other for a long time, just watching each other, enjoying the feeling of being held while holding the other, not wanting to spoil one moment of their long-awaited time together. And then they got busy.

* * *

>Yawning, Tyr awoke, seeing a strange room. A heavy arm rested around her midsection, and she looked over her shoulder to see John still completely asleep. She smiled and leaned closer to kiss him before sliding out of the bed, flexing sore arms. Female Spartans seemed to go one of two routes for their physical stature. One, they would become thin as a rail with a wiry strength, like Kelly, or two, they would come to have almost a male's stockiness, like Linda had looked right after she had finished adjusting to her augmentation. Well, to be truthful, Linda had thinned out after a few years, so that was hardly fair to use her for a reference.<p><p>

But Tyr had always been thin. Sometimes that lead to teasing, but it never failed to amuse her to watch as people just stared while she inhaled enough food to last two Spartans for two days in one sitting, and not look like she gained a pound.

"Where are you going?"

"The shower."

"Already?"

"Yes. Why?"

John stumbled out of bed after her. "Because I'm joining you."

"Again? So soon after last night? Last I remember, you weren't that resilient."

He looked at her blankly. "I just didn't want Mendez to scream at me for being so-called lazy, and I most certainly didn't want to hear the teasing from Kelly, James, Linda and Fred. Those four were brutal with their words." He grinned, shaking his head. "And I'm needed to help Ysabelle complete training her Spartans."

"Ah. So you think she'll be up on time this morning?"

"She's the Squad-Leader. You know she will be."

"Mendez and Leader came back here before you did. You know that Mir spent the night with Yssa."

"Indeed." The slightly-older Spartan grinned, turning the water on full-blast and hot. "I ended up passing through that hangar on my way back, since I had gone to the other mess hall to avoid those Marine girls who still don't know that you're here."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Stop playing innocent and turn around so I can get your back. Seriously, now, John, tell me."

"Tell you what? That I really doubt that anyone would miss the fact that they were passionately making love? Hah. They could wake Johnson up with all their noise."

"So they really are in love with each other."

"They have been, but couldn't tell each other for different reasons. Yssa didn't want to be rejectedâ€"

"That's completely normal for a girl."

"â€and Junior didn't know how to deal with himself, how to go about it, until he talked to Leader. Here, give me that. My turn to help."

Tyr scrubbed her hair while John ran the rough sponge over her back. "So you think that they're a good couple?"

"How do you mean?"

"There aren't many human-Elite pairs, if you haven't noticed."

John stopped washing his woman's back, turning her shoulder slightly so he could look into her eyes. "Tyr, don't you know?"

"Know what?"

He shook his head, returning to helping her reach the places that she couldn't wash easily. "You'll see later on today."

"That so?"

"You're helping me train them."

* * *

>The moment Tyr entered the room, she saw what seemed to be a free-for-all. John grinned, looking to Leader and Arbiter, both of which had looked at the door when it opened, and indicated the brawl. A muted klaxon rang over the din, resulting in a complete halt of all motion. John walked forward, his movements liquid and free. Each were paired up with their opposite-gender partner. The Master Chief stopped, then walked along the length of the special-operations force. Once at the far end, in the complete silence, he said, "Pair up. And not by who you were assigned to."

"Chief?" Mendez asked his first favorite. _What was he doing?_

Ignoring the CPO, John glared at the younger Spartans. "I want you to be with the partner that you've chosen as your own. Anyone who isn't goes up against the back wall."

Everything shifted. Some Elite couples stood together, some human ones. Most were by the wall, wondering why the Master Chief was doing this.

Tyr saw how almost a third of the pairs were human-Elite, just like John had said. The Elites were all male-female, as were the human-Elite group. She looked at the human pairs, noticing how there were an uneven amount of male and female. Specifically, there were two more females than there were males. And even then, there were a few couples that weren't male-female, either. She walked over to Mendez, Arbiter and Leader, seeing how they looked at her as if she knew something. Tyr shook her head, shrugging that slightest bit.

John started to speak again, looking at the human-human pairs. "You each will know what I'm talking about. Elites, pay attention. I don't know if you will follow what I'm going to tell you." He stopped before Yssa and Mir, noting how the others in the human-Elite group were watching their leaders in a new sort of way. He continued on. "In identifying with another individual whom you are not assigned to, you have formed a unique bond. For this group here, the bond is even more unique than I can even guess at." He moved back to the human-human pairs. "The majority of your group will have it relatively easy." The older Spartan pointed to the Elite-Elite group. "People won't even care about how they're paired. Most humans still don't trust you Elites. Sometimes, I wonder if I trust you, despite having Arbiter guard my back."

He moved again, this time so that he could view the entire three groups. But his attention was mainly upon the human-Elite pair group, and the few same-sex pairs in the human group. "Those of you who have a pairing that isn't something that most people want to call 'normal,' you'll have it the hardest." He made eye-contact with Yssa, nodding slightly. She nodded back in return. He moved his gaze to the same-sex couples, and they caught the drift as well. He would meet with them later on, after the general meeting was done.

"Spartans, Elites; watch these individuals carefully. They are the ones that you should model yourselves after. They are the ones that would berserk if something happened to a loved one. I do not condemn that." He changed the subject swiftly. "I condemn unnecessary attention to those who some of you think have 'strange' tastes. Elites, you are of the Brotherhood, where you look out for each other. How can you continue backbiting someone, then think that the person you were blasted well making fun of will watch your back in battle? Spartans, you've grown up together. You should know how each individual thinks. You should understand how people think and act. Why are you not pulling together, all of you? If you don't start acting like a real team, then you won't be one. This isn't a matter of winning a tug-of-war." John made sure that he had looked almost every Elite and Spartan in the eye as he spoke. "This is a matter of life and death. You don't shape up, you die. And don't say that this is your Petty-Officer's fault, because it isn't. She's been pulling almost all the weight when I was introduced to you, and you know that she shouldn't have been. Likewise, Mir'wustomee has been doing the same for his Elites."

After a long silence, John finished the rebuke. "I want to see that changed. And it will be, or I'll have you discharged. Back to sparring. New partners. I'm having a meeting with a select few of your corps. Don't disturb us unless there's blood."

Turning on his heel, he walked out, followed by those whom he had

singled out. To make it look like there were more than just the "hard" pairs, some of the Spartans' male-female pairs walked with them, turning and waiting down the hall to go back later, as if they were wanted for only part of the meeting. The other trainers walked with John as he entered a small conference room, sound-proofing it once everyone was inside. And he sat, rubbing at his face. "Blast it all, but Yssa, why didn't you tell me before yesterday that you were having trouble with them?"

"We've still been busy training forâ€" "

"Regardless, Ysabelle, why didn't you tell me? Or your father?"

She sighed. "So many things have been going on, Master Chief."

He rested his head in his hands, replying softly, "I'm John to Spartans. Plain and simple."

"What about the Elites?" Mir asked.

The older Spartan didn't look up for a moment, but when he did, he nodded. "Yes. To them as well."

"Why are we here?" one of the humans asked. His boyish face looked had a tender, scared look about it continually, but John knew that this young man had a heart of steel; a heart of a killer.

"Kieran," John sighed, "you're here to help. You and Noccolo have been partners for years. You know the discrimination that a lot of heterosexuals have toward you and him."

"Yeah . . . ?" Noccolo asked, his dark features harsh, as usual. They were complete opposites to one another physically, but their minds and souls were the complete same through and through.

"The two of you will be able to help this group deal with the discrimination that you all know will happen." He looked at one pair, Sybyl and her Elite Hora'targii. "You two have been the longest-known human-Elite couple in this group. You'll be helping as well." Shifting his eyes back to the three human-human pairs, he looked at the girls next. "Tanya and Ruana, you two will also be helping. You six are free to go."

They left silently to join up with the other humans who were going to be waiting for them just down the hall. Tyr looked at Ysabelle, getting her first real look at this young successor. She walked closer to John, her muscled arms folded over her chest. The Master Chief sighed, seeing the door close and seal again. "You twelve have a lot of learning to do. If I'm not mistaken, eight of you were paired up from the start." He watched their affirming nods. "So then you four . . . ?"

They were two male humans individually paired up with Elite females. Somehow, John didn't see that working all that well. He had many talks with Arbiter about their culture, and knew that Elite females had an instinctual want to breed. And breed. And breed. He shook his head. "You four stay careful. Mainly, I'm worried about you Elites with a girl attached. As you know already, men here are generally protective over the women they're around. They'll take shots for a woman they don't know. They might try to drive you away from

her."

Ysabelle stood straighter, moving just that tiniest bit towards Mir. Tyr smiled, and added, "And girls, I know that you've most likely taken shots for your men in the Spartans. I have." She showed off a plasma scar on her left arm.

One of the younger women leaned forward, making a sound of awe. John recognized her as the medic of the group. She shook her head. "Looks like it hurt."

"And went a bit deeper than planned, even with a shield."

"Who'd you take it for?" the medic asked. Her name magically appeared in John's memory: Alyse.

Tyr pointed to John. "That one."

"Sounds like he didn't appreciate it."

John snorted. "Oh, I showed her my full appreciation. Stop teasing your elders. Everyone out; get back to sparring. There's nothing else I have planned for the day for your group."

They filed out past the Spartan couple, silent and solemn, cataloging away what had just happened in their enhanced minds. John stared at Tyr, catching her gaze. They would have a long and hard road ahead of them.

6. Chapter Six

Faith's Fury

> By: Sinead<p>

Author's Note: I hope this keeps you busy for the next month!
Favorite character of the chapter: Kidafan'asha._

* * *

><p>Chapter Six<p>

"So what's it like?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, John. Being with him."

Tyr smiled as she flipped the gun over, disassembling it to clean it. "How do you define 'being' as?"

Ysabelle shrugged, finishing cleaning a sniper-rifle. "Anything, really."

"All right, let me ask you a question, then I'll answer."

"Sure."

"Was Mir your first?"

Ysabelle put the gun back on the rack, pulling another one out silently. She looked at Tyr. "No. And I never wanted to love again because of the first one."

"He wasn't a Spartan, then."

"Oh, he was," Ysabelle replied, breaking eye-contact and leaning into rubbing the alloy of the shotgun's barrel. "He was my second-in-command long before we loved each other."

"What happened to him?" the older Spartan woman asked quietly.

"He's still alive."

"That's not what I asked you. What happened to him."

Hot tears rolled down Ysabelle's angry face. "Augmentation happened to him. His nerves cut out on him. He's in a tank for the rest of his life, his bones mutilated by the ceramic plates they bonded to them." Her eyes were dark with anger as she aimed them up at the woman before her. "What else do you want me to spit out? What else do you want to pry from me? More pain? More anguish? Have at, then!"

"You have a crush on John."

"Yeah, and?"

Tyr's face broke into a kind, warm smile. "And?"

"You're his. And he just about eats from your hand! You tell him to jump and he'll ask you how high!" She slammed the unloaded shotgun onto the table and sat back, simmering. "And I don't see how he can love you."

"That so? All right. 'Have at,' you said. I want to know what you think of me. I want to prove myself to you, to show you that I'm not the bad-guy." She sighed, her smile turning sad. "I want to be not only a comrade-in-arms, but a friend. You're an intelligent, fair and loyal leader, and you have many qualities that your Spartans and Elites respect, but you still hold some sadness, some anger in you that won't let go. And I asked John if I could spend this time with you to help you figure yourself out." She took in a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "He's concerned for you. He knows what the Spartan-Threes need. And they need you to be strong for them."

Ysabelle broke into full-blown weeping. Tyr rose and walked around the table to sit on the bench beside the younger Spartan, wrapping kind arms around the shaking form. After a while, her voice came, muffled against Tyr's shoulder. "I love him. I still love him."

"The other Spartan?"

"Ian. His name is Ian. And I can't bear to even look at him. I want to be with him again. But Mir loves me."

"Mir loves you more than he loves life," Tyr confirmed. "He loves you and knows that you hold a part of your heart away from him."

"He talked to you and John."

"Not to me. He still doesn't know me, and I don't expect him to trust me so soon, either. He talked with Arbiter first, who brought him to John."

"Well, why didn't he ask me first!" she roared through her sobs.

"Because he knew that you first had to talk to someone of your own species and gender before you could open yourself _completely_ to him."

"Why _you_?"

"Because I asked John if I could help."

Ysabelle's eyes aimed up at Tyr. "You?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you ask him to talk to me?"

"Because I want you to trust me," Tyr replied.

Ysabelle let herself be cradled in the strong, motherly arms.

"Because I want you to understand that even though John chose me, he cares for you. He's not a stone-hearted man under the mask. He's a loving, wonderful person. Just like Mir is. And you've seen that."

The Petty Officer sniffed the last of her tears away, changing the subject. "Where are we going? I didn't have time to ask Commander Keyes at the last course-correction."

"Earth. John and I are going to be meeting an old friend at ONI."

"That's where Ian was sent."

"I know. That's where they were all sent."

After a while, Tyr sat Ysabelle back up on her own, violet eyes smiling, silver hair glinting in the soft light of the armory. "And as a lover, John is passionate, ardent, and always goal-driven."

"Oh."

Tyr laughed out loud. "That's all? 'Oh'? Hah!" She chuckled, then asked, "So about _your_ mate?"

"My _man_ is everything that John is and _more_. There's no competition."

"Let's compromise."

"On what?"

"They're both better than the other, and that's how it's supposed to be in our eyes."

"I like that."

"Good. 'Cause I'd hate to force you to agree to it."

Ysabelle spat out a rather unflattering word, causing Tyr to laugh harder and pat her shoulder none-too-lightly. "Atta girl. Keep that up and you'll speak the Elite's language before too long! I've heard that some of their cusses are top-hole and rather descriptive!"

"You have no idea."

* * *

>"What do the humans call you?" Leader asked Kidafan'asha later that day as they lazed in the warm steam-room that was called the "sauna."<p><p>

"Kida. Odd, though."

"Why?"

"I would almost prefer to be called Asha."

"Then tell them that."

Kidafan'asha blinked at him in shock. "I couldn't do that!"

"Must I remind you constantly how flexible these humans are over matters of preference?" He chuckled. "Besides, it sounds too much like the shortened name for your sister: Jira. It is nice to be separated from a faceless crowd once in a while."

"It is . . ."

"What are you thinking?"

Jira'kirene opened the door, then closed it behind her, sighing as she entered the atmosphere. "Hope I'm not interrupting, Leader."

"Not in the least, Jira'kirene."

Kidafan'asha smiled to herself at the interaction between the two. To cover up that small acknowledgment of her knowing that the two were becoming close, she leaned back against the wall, sighing deeply. "Feels like home in here."

"Mm," Jira'kirene replied, sitting next to the leader. "Have either of you seen Arbiter recently?"

Taking the gentle hint, Kidafan'asha shook her head slightly, starting to stand. "He might be in trouble with the Master Chief again. I'll check up on him for you if you would like."

"Why are you going?" Leader asked, completely out of the loop.

"I've been in here longer than you, and the humans don't tend to sit in here for long periods of time. They get worried when we do. Did you want me to put more water on the heater?"

"Please," Jira replied, winking at her sister covertly.

Once that was done, she was out of the small room, closing the door behind her and turning the sign to face "Occupied." The Elite sighed, walking down the halls and almost into Tyr and Ysabelle, both of which were looking rather tired. "Weren't you two only cleaning some of your weaponry?"

"Yeah," Tyr replied, yawning. "But I've already had a long few days, and we were done, anyway. Where are you going?"

"I have to make sure that Arbiter isn't being chewed upon by your mate."

Breaking into giggles and laughter, Tyr held her stomach as she shook her head, waving the younger Elite sister off. "Go, go! John's in a meeting with Commander Keyes! He'd rather chew the table than be sitting in there with her!"

Kidafan'asha shook her head, not getting human humor, remembering something. "Ah, Ysabelle, might you ask your comrades that . . . if it is at all negotiable, that is . . . I would prefer if you called me 'Asha' instead of 'Kida?' I . . . ah . . ."

"No, don't worry about it. I'll get word around," Ysabelle replied. "And you can call me Yssa, the same as everyone else. Only Dad calls me by my full name, and that's only when I've screwed up again."

"Ah. Thank you."

"No prob. Hey, Arbiter should be in his room and staring at his armor again, just so you know."

And then they were gone, passing the sauna door without even seeming to notice the sounds starting to emanate from the other side. Asha turned and walked slowly to the Arbiter's room, resting her fingertips upon the door lightly.

"Come in."

She was shocked. He heard that!

"Are you going to come in or will I open the door for you?"

With a small sigh and the tensing of her back, she walked into the room, closing the door after her. Arbiter had been sitting upon the floor, doing exactly what Ysabelle had predicted. He indicated with a small jerk of his head for her to come closer, which she timidly did and sat after another small motion from the male. He read her uneasy face easily, stating, "Your sister and my brother have found a common bond between them, I take it."

"That is true, Arbiter."

"I'm mortal. Just like the rest who have worn that armor." He looked

back at it. "Each has left their mark upon it, their individual personality, on a place that cannot be seen from a casual or normal glance."

"You're trying to figure out what to place next to their marks."

"Yes."

They went silent again, hearing the younger Elites' playful flirting and bantering in the main hangar. Arbiter sighed, standing to walk over to the armor and remove the chestplate from the rack, bringing it back to show the female. "Here, look."

Turning it over, she saw innumerable scrawls of signatures. Arbiter was right. Each had their own personality to it. They were all beautiful, ancient, and something that didn't seem mortal . . . but they were. They were all too mortal. They had all died in this armor. They had all been killed either in battle or when they outlived their purpose. Once an Arbiter . . . always an Arbiter until death.

"Is it like this on the inside of all the plates?"

"Save for the gauntlets," he replied, taking the chestplate back again, walking to put it upon the rack with practiced ease. His robes had fluttered with the movement, and the burn-scar was briefly seen again. As he sat, he saw her eyes still aimed downward, towards his chest. "What is it?"

She reached over, and slowly, cautiously, pushed the robes aside, revealing the ugly mark. Her fingers paused, and unconsciously, she began tracing it. First the curved upper and lower lines . . . then the slightly-curved bisecting line . . . the upper partial parabolic swipe and the small line that intersected with the upper curve . . . and the lower parabola . . . Her palm rested over the entire mark, covering it from view as she looked up at the tortured Elite. "Over your heart they put this. They had no right to blame you for what has saved us all."

"It is the ugliest thing I have ever seen," he snarled.

"So it is. But it is also a reminder to always hold faith, to hold true to what you believe in, no matter what anyone tells you to do."

Trembling now, Arbiter rested his own hand over Asha's, then sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm angry at those liars even as we speak. They took everything from me. Everything I cared for, everything I loved, everything I stood for . . . everything."

"They can't do that now. You're no longer in their palm, to do their bidding." She leaned closer to him, her expression showing her concern. "They can never take me from you."

The breath caught in Arbiter's throat. "What?"

"Please, you heard me. I don't care what my family would think. I don't care. My sister . . ."

"Is having a lot of fun with my brother," Arbiter grumbled affectionately. "I know. They are both of an age where love is more important than fertility."

"I never cared about if I'm able to have children or not."

"I don't want you to risk your life," he finally said after a long pause. "Being around me is courting a death that can make whatever Tartarus did to me look like a child's game."

Her hand pressed closer over the scar, her voice silent, her eyes speaking volumes.

And Arbiter sighed, leaning towards her suddenly, pressing his forehead to hers softly. She whispered, "Will you let me know who you really are? Will you let me know the kind-hearted male under that scar, in that scarred heart you own?"

"If you tell me why you want so much to share my bed."

"I don't want to share your bed. I want to share your life. And it is because I have always loved you. I followed your career as you rose to becoming a Fleet Commander; I watched your victories; I watched the beginning of Reach's destruction and I hacked my way into databases so that I could see what they wouldn't release to us about Halo. I saw it. I understood why John did what he did. He's saved every one of us, and I've thanked him for that." She touched the tips of her mandibles against his once, the equivalent of a human hug between two close individuals. "I want to see you for who you are, and not the heretic they say you are."

Arbiter sighed, then nodded. "All right." He moved slightly, then reconsidered and stood, helping Asha to her feet as well. He brought her over to the large bed, moving the warmed cushions from the couch so that they lined the wall, giving them something to lean against. When he sat, he shifted slightly, the Mark of Shame flaring slightly as burns do. Something cool rested against his skin, and he sighed, reaching out to pull Asha to him, letting her make herself comfortable while she still held the chilled pack against his chest.

And he told her his past that night.

* * *

>"Grandfather! Grandfather, wake up!"<p><p>

Leader blinked sleepily. "What? Ah, Rings, Arai . . . what is it?"

"Mother told me that you needed to see something when she came back from Grand-Uncle's room."

"What _exactly_ did she tell you?"

"That she wanted you to see something. She didn't tell me what, but she was grinning about it."

"Can't be good, then. I wonder if he got himself inebriated again last night." Sighing, he stood and walked from the room as he was,

Arai still behind him. Rethinking something, he said to his granddaughter, "Go back and tell her that I'm going. Then eat something and annoy John."

Arai grinned. "Yes, Grandfather!"

She scampered off, leaving the not-that-old Grandfather smiling, remembering how his own daughter had been like that. Ah, but they always grow so quickly . . . He shook his head, opening the door to his brother's room just enough to look in. Nothing moved. He looked at the tray sitting outside the door, then picked it up and hefted it inside, setting it soundlessly upon the desk, then closed the door just as quietly. Looking around, he saw the chestplate of the Arbiter's armor resting against the rack, not upon it. Leader picked it up and turned it over, seeing the signatures of a thousand names, then one bright, new one above all the rest, right below the neckline lip.

He hadn't seen his brother's birth-name in years.

A shifting of fabric in the next room over caused him to turn, the chestplate ready to be thrown, but he stopped the movement, instead using it to lower the metal back to where it had been. He took a step closer and blinked at what he saw. So. Jira had been right after all. Her sister had ended up in the Arbiter's room.

With a swift move, the younger brother glared at the elder, but stopped and sighed, whispering, "What are you doing here?"

"Your niece brought enough breakfast for both of you and the entire commanding team, but left it outside the door, sending Arai'shivaana to wake me, telling me that I should get here and see something."

Arbiter blinked, sighing, resting his head back again. "I forgot about the meeting this morning."

"So did I."

"You were in the sauna with Jira."

"You know?"

"At least half of the Amber Clad knows, brother. You're loud. So was she." An eye blinked humourously up at Leader. "Besides. Asha told me. And I was too busy last night getting to know her, and letting her get to know me."

"She loves you with everything."

"That I know. I told her . . ."

"She was upset about your belief that no female would ever consider you for a mate, wasn't she."

"That would be correct, brother."

"You seemed to have calmed her, though."

"Somewhat."

"You mean that I was doing most of the calming," the female's sleepy voice said. She shifted to look at Leader. "I've heard most males rant about my sister. What's keeping you?"

Laughing, the elder turned and raised his hand over his shoulder in their gesture for a hopeless situation, starting to walk back to his own room. "Get up, and get ready for the meeting."

* * *

>"The majority of the Spartans will be going to the surface to ONI headquarters at 900 hours our time, 1200 hours Eastern Standard Time. They will be touching down in the old District of Columbia of the former United States ETA 1300 hours." John looked at the faces of the older generation of commanders. Mendez stretched a shoulder covertly, then settled again. The Master Chief blinked once.
"Questions?"<p><p>

"What will you be doing?" Arbiter asked.

"Visiting old team-mates," was the soft reply.

7. Chapter Seven

Faith's Fury

> By: Sinead<p>

Author's Note: Thanks to everyone who's been so patient with me! And I remembered just how fun the word "inebriated" can be! Favorite character of the chapter is dually RenÃ© and Ian. I'll soon have some sketches of my characters upon my DeviantArt account. I wish that I could post the links here, but go to my Deviantart account, then to "scraps" and they're the last and third-to-last. Hope you enjoy!_

Nightdragon0, thanks for the review! And I HAVE to split everything evenly between my two favorites! I mean, it's only fair, right? RIGHT! (grins)_

Fhulhi the Crazy, I'm glad that you like it! It's going to be somewhat different from here on in, so keep tuned! I hope you continue to enjoy the way the story turns._

Chubaca . . . I'm a helpless romantic. Completely helpless. As in . . . I'm not all that great at writing anything else. I think. But anyway, I'm trying, and there will be a few more "fluffly" chapters before things get serious. Or this might be the last fluffy one before interesting events happen. And I'm not revealing about anything that's going on, but I'm not the kinda person who likes seeing main characters getting killed. In Beast Wars, not only was a main character (Dinobot) killed, but he was my FAVORITE! . . . and those who know me in the Beast Wars writing circle I'm in . . . they know that I can rant about the injustice done to the series. So I'll not torture you with it, but I'll let you see what I'm planning for yourself, if you continue to read it!_

(starts laughing) Yomiko, sometimes I wonder, myself. Don't worry, I don't think that they'll have kids naturally. . . . I don't even

think that it's possible . . . (shudders) . . . I don't even want to THINK about that, really . . . (laughs more) But great thought!_

VenomatikM16 . . . cool name, to begin with! For "Angel's Halo," never worry, there's a sequel in progress. It's taking up much space in my head at the moment. Now, in order of chapter summaries: Chapter 2â€" CPO Mendez was somewhat old, sure, but he's . . . y'know, too cool a character to just lay to rest. I actually have no idea how old he is, nor do I really care, since he's simply fun to have hanging around. Chapter 4â€" Why would Leader's son be kinda crazy? Remember in the game, when Leader's introduced, his speech: ". . . by the blood of our fathers; the blood of our sons . . ." So it kinda seems to me that they swear to uphold the Covenant by the past and future generations of their own line. Why shouldn't he have a son? Or a daughter and grandchildren? (grins) Chapter 6â€" The elite partnering idea . . . are you referring to the Spec-Ops Elites with the Spartans? OR the idea concerning Elites having human mates? 'Cause the human mate thing has been done before. The joining of the two elite-operations forces idea has been kicking around . . . well . . . truthfully, it's kinda based upon "Angel's Halo" sequel, where there's a similar situation . . . and truthfully, it was kinda "fly by the seat of my pants" sorta things. Yeah. Heh!

* * *

><p>Chapter Seven<p>

ONI spooks and the troops that protected them were as careful as ever about who came or left the building complex. And they sure as any heaven or hell were _not_ allowing aliens in, no matter _who_ they were with.

"Rank, soldier," John barked, wearing his impressive black parade uniform, thickly studded with ribbons and medals upon the left breast.

"I don't have to answer to you, Spartan."

"_Rank_. _Now_."

A man with salt-and-pepper hair strode over, the rank of Vice Admiral causing all who saw him to salute at the same time. He looked at the young officer on duty. "You refused to let _him_ in? He's been here before, and you know better than to deny a Spartan entrance into this place!"

"Sir, the Elites with himâ€"

"Enough. You think that he'd be standing around with Elites that would mean harm?" He looked at the Spartans, a long silence growing longer between them. With a huffed breath, he turned back towards the direction he came from. "At ease and follow me. I know why you're back."

Aging hadn't decreased the effects of augmentation. Nor had it lessened the pain caused by it. He was dressed and in his reinforced wheelchair, as usual, sighing as he demanded of his assigned AI, "What did you get me up for? I was sleeping well, you runt-minded useless piece of software, and _this_ is how you wake me up? With a

newbie?"

"Sir, I apologizeâ€"

"Not accepted. I'm still angry at you."

"Sir, I have some news that you shouldâ€"

"Later, Deannash, later. What's the media circulating about the Sangheili? Anything new?"

"Yes, sir. They're on Earth, and have been spotted heading in this direction. That's why I woke you so early. The one who is guiding them has requested a meeting with you. He isâ€"

"I don't care who he is or who he thinks he is. I'm not meeting with him. There are reports I have to get in and others that I have to research. Deal with it."

"Too late, Fhajad," a gravelly voice chuckled. "You're getting old."

Turning his head towards the voice, the Spartan blinked. "John, by God." He reached his hand out, hating the way it shook, and felt the reaffirming, calm grasp of the man he wished he could have fought the Covenant beside. For a brief moment the shaking of his limbs stopped, and he relaxed, sighing. "Always good to have you around again. I don't have to watch my back."

"Because I've always got it for you," John replied, smiling. "Fhajad, how are you?"

"Truthfully? Horrible. Breathing and swallowing are still fine, but the shakes never stop. It makes me tense up and that just hurts worse . . ."

"They stopped a moment ago."

"A flux. Happens." He shrugged. "Although . . . it only happens when I'm back around my family." He looked around the massive form of his former team-leader, seeing three . . . four . . . five Sangheili watching him intently. A girl with silver-streaked hair and striking black eyes stared at him. Fhajad indicated towards her with his eyes. "Who's this beauty? She looks familiar."

"Guess," John replied, sitting on a chair next to the continually-shaking man.

Raising a trembling hand to rub at his chin, Fhajad blinked. "Would you come closer, please?"

Ysabelle did, seeing the humor in John's eyes, and knelt upon one knee so the wheelchair-bound man could look at her easier. CPO Mendez walked around Leader, causing Fhajad to look at him suddenly, then back at the young woman, and again at the man who had raised them. "Chief."

"Something to say, trainee?"

"She's your daughter."

"And a Spartan." He indicated the armored Elites behind him. "This is Leader, his son Mir'wustomee, Jira'kirene and her younger sister Kidafan'asha." He indicated the grey-armored Elite last. "And this is Arbiter."

Fhajad could hardly contain himself in his glee. "Tell me! Everything you can, please! I have been living on second-hand information for years about the Sangheili, and the spooks won't tell me much as I'm a Spartan! And to actually meet the Arbiter!" He felt John's hand press lightly upon his shoulder, reminding him to slow down. He swallowed, and amended, "That is, once you're ready for a long sit to talk."

Mir chuckled, walking closer to crouch beside Ysabelle. "I would be honored to answer any questions that you might have about my people."

Leader also took a step forward. "I am honored that you have learned our name for ourselves. Not many humans call us by 'Sangheili,' and in appreciation, I'll stay with my son to answer your questions."

"I will as well," Jira added. "I'm not at all interested in the workings of this place, and wasn't to begin with, but I now find you interesting. Why do you shake?"

Fhajad gave loose to a sad half-chuckle. "Augmentation. One way they altered us was to speed up our neural pathways. Unfortunately, Jira'kirene, my body didn't take to it as well as the Chief's did."

She walked over and sat upon his other side, starting to talk to him as John and Ysabelle rose again. Fhajad stopped her with a small motion, looking up at his childhood friend. "Going to the others?"

"Yes. We'll come back here once I'm done."

Fhajad let his eyes wander over to the door again, and he held his hand out, his voice unable to beckon the woman forth. Tyr walked over and embraced him fully, kissing his cheek and resting her hand upon the back of his neck, holding their foreheads together, feeling his hands rest upon one elbow and the opposite shoulder. They stayed like that for a long while, John already gone from the room with Mendez, Ysabelle, Arbiter and Kidafan'asha. After a deep sigh, they separated. Fhajad tried to raise his hands to wipe his eyes, but couldn't. Tyr did that for him, whispering, "I'm so glad that I can see you again."

"Tyr, you reckless!"

"I know, I know, Jad, but it wasn't my fault." She smiled. "But you're looking good for a half-dead monstrosity."

"Real funny."

"Excuse me, and I apologize for not understanding human relationships, but are you not with John as his mate?"

Fhajad blinked, resorting to a low chuckle as Tyr smiled at Mir. "I

am. Fhajad and I are siblings-in-spirit as you would say."

"I thought that she was dead for almost two years," Fhajad added.
"I'm overjoyed that she's not."

"Siblings you are, then . . ." Leader chuckled. "Tyr, I believe that John will need your support." His glance leveled at his son. "And Mir'wustomee, you have knowledge that Ysabelle will need _yours_. I will answer his questions with Jira'kirene. Scram."

They grinned, nodded, and left, but not before Tyr held Fhajad's hand once more, then left him with the Elites, asking them if he could record this, asking questions about their lives, their culture, everything that his information-starved brain would think of. The Spartan and the Elite walked towards a guard. She saluted, saying, "They're in the first room on the right, Ma'am."

"Thank you."

They entered, seeing three Spartan-IIIs doing as Fhajad had done, only this time Ysabelle was sitting between two of them, her hands upon them as she answered questions. John was answering the questions of another, his smile ready and his disposition gentle. Arbiter covered anything that was aimed at him. Mendez was nowhere in sight. Mir chuckled, and the three stationary Spartans looked at him, their faces open and accepting. The Elite and the Spartan-II walked to comrades with attitudes just as open.

* * *

>"It's going to be hard to go in there," John forewarned the Sangheili and Tyr. Ysabelle already knew. He sighed. "They don't look human anymore." <p>Arbiter swallowed, seeing pain upon John's face. Still he hated this man in a dark corner of his heart. Still he resented everything that he represented. But yet the Master Chief brought him to this place, showing him comrades crippled by what had given him strength. Why do this? Why show them this?<p>

The Master Chief opened the door, striding inside the dimmed room, resting his hand upon a wall of glass on the far side. The lights within the tank slowly came to life, and Tyr shuddered, unable to look at the forms. Their faces hadn't changed, but their limbs had. One in the five tanks awoke, her clear blue-green eyes looking at the assembled people, resting upon John. He tried to smile for her, but in the first time in the years that he had visited these people, he couldn't. RenÃ© saw that. The neural interlink that allowed her to communicate flared to life, and words came up through a vocal simulator that was nothing more than a simple AI translation program of thought to speech. A feminine voice spoke soothingly, happily.
"You're back, John."

"Yeah. I'm back."

"You know that you're uneasy this time. Tell me why."

"I don't know."

RenÃ© looked through the liquid to her left, through a glass separating wall between herself and Kirk. She sent him a mental wake-up call, and he blinked sleepy brown eyes at John, relaxing a

twisted body. His vocal simulator had a calm, peaceful male voice. "You blasted took yourself long enough to come back. Did I give you nightmares again?"

Ysabelle saw him as he walked closer, resting a hand upon either tank, his forehead upon the partition between them. "I can't leave you alone. You're still my Spartans, and I cannot abandon you."

"You never have," RenÃ© replied quickly. "Never."

John cried.

Ysabelle turned to look at her Spartans, walking over to the first tank. "Dierdre."

"You look good," came the cocky reply. "Been getting some action in bed lately?"

"Please knock it off." She indicated with her eyes at the elder Spartan. By this time Tyr was with him, her own tears falling as she reached over his hands to touch the tanks. Ysabelle looked back at the first one who had been rushed into the suspension liquid. "You understand."

"Yes, of course. Who's the Elite?"

"Mir'wustomee. He's my partner."

"In how many ways?"

"Ha-ha." She shot her friend a glare. Often times they communicated with each other with written instant correspondences during a late night. "How's Felicia doing?"

"Faring better. She's sleeping off most of the effects, and should soon be able to get out of these things."

"I'm glad."

"Ian needs to wake up to your face."

Mir looked at Yssa's eyes, seeing them brimming with tears. At her nod and move towards the far tank, he looked up at Dierdre. "Ian is . . . ?"

"The one she loved before you," was the quiet, sad reply, almost lost in the soft sounds of suspension liquid constantly rotating to keep fresh.

Ysabelle reached over and rested both hands upon the tank. "Ian?"

"Ysabelle," came the sighed reply as he awoke. His eyes spoke to her of his love. "You're still alive."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? You've kept in touch with me. You've never stopped talking with us."

Her voice had tears in it. "For something that I never wanted to happen to me again."

"What is it?"

"Look behind me."

"An Elite. He's talking with Dierdre. And the Master Chief and Tyr . . . and two more Elites."

"The first one's name is Mir'wustomee."

Ian blinked once, slowly, his mind taking her complete distress in stride. She always knew that he could read through her mind and body language as if it were written on paper. Smiling slightly, he replied to her, "You fell in love again."

She nodded mutely.

"Yssa, beautiful . . ."

Mir heard the muffled sob, and saw Dierdre blink for him to get to Ysabelle. He rested his hands upon her shoulders, lowering his head to look at her face once. He then looked up at the misshapen human floating in the liquid. "You are one of the Spartan-Threes."

"I am. You are the one who loves Yssa as I do."

"I am."

"Care for her."

"I would die for her."

Yssa hid her face as she cried harder.

"I do not doubt that, Mir'wustomee. I would have done the same. But it is not my place to be the one guarding her as her chosen man, mate, or even as her champion." He paused, seeing the other Elites look at him, then continued. "And I charge you with protecting her heart and soul as well as her mind and body. Do you understand that?"

"Please don't be angry with me, with who I am, or with the circumstances. I understand, Ian. I understand perfectly, and I will never harm her. For me to hurt her would be to beg for death by the hands of her father or one whom he would choose to kill me by."

"The first two I will agree to. But I will ever be angry at the circumstances that landed me in this tank and away from the one woman I love."

At this point Ysabelle had almost collapsed with her weary heartache and mourning. Mir gently moved his hands to that if she did crumble, he could catch her easily. His eyes found the younger human male's again. "I will never cease my love nor my watching over her. If she will not allow it because of my own selfish emotions, then I will insist upon your orders."

Ian's face had the expression of one who had just sighed sadly. "Your

emotions are hardly selfish, Mir'wustomee. They are in the right place. Emotions that are selfish are ones that are placed wrongly."

"Please call me 'Mir.' My human friends do."

The man sighed again, and shifted slightly in the liquid encasing his body. "Mir, then. Like the old 1980s space-station cohabited by the Russians and the Americans. Good. I guess that means that you're finally thinking of us as your equals."

"I'm . . . not sure that I understand."

Feeling shaking, he looked down at Ysabelle, seeing her smiling through her tears. "Ian, you wretch, you always did that. You really are a mound of useless information."

"Ever truthful, my beauty."

"Oh, Ian. What am I ever going to do with you?"

"Love me as I am. And love him as he is. You heard us talking. I see your tears and I know your heart yearns for me even as I look like this, in this tank."

"Ian . . ."

"There's a chance for me. Don't worry. I'll always love you."

"What chance?"

"You'll see soon enough."

A tall man stood beside Ysabelle, his calloused, large hand resting beside hers upon the unbreakable glass. "Ian."

"Master Chief."

"John to you. You're a Spartan just like those I grew up with."

They watched each other for a long while, and John nodded. "I know what that chance is. It's possible, and has been successfully done before. It'll happen."

"I hope so."

"Keep that hope. I'll see you tomorrow. We're sleeping here for the night, and I've left most of the group talking with Fhajad. He's most likely exhausted them with questions at this point."

"He would talk the ear off of a donkey, sir."

". . . what?"

Ysabelle laughed.

* * *

>Her dreams were wild, angry. They had spent three days here, and now she was about to get an AI for her team. Said AI was supposed to be

one of the 'smart' ones, apparently more so than Cortana had been.
<p>Sighing, she sat up in bed, looking over her shoulder to see Mir still curled up around a pillow. Smiling, Yssa moved back to lay beside him, gently taking the pillow from his arms and replacing it with her own body, kissing the side of his face. He murmured, curling her closer to him and whispering, "You're awake and nervous about this AI."<p>

"Yes."

"It is three hours until dawn. Sleep. The AI will be introduced to you tomorrow, once you're back in armor and ready to test. You need to be ready for it."

"I know."

A small silence came between them. Finally, Ysabelle whispered, "You know this room is soundproofed . . ."

His reply was immediate. "I thought you would never ask."

* * *

>"Spartans, your new AIs." <p>John held the memory crystal in his palm, then inserted it in the back of his helmet. Cortana was old and was soon going to be retired, as it were. He would miss his last tie with Doctor Halsey, but it wasn't his choice in the first place. A cool presence came into the back of his mind, alerting him that the AI was there. He smiled. "Welcome in."<p>

"Glad to be back on the battle-ready team. And you never told me how roomy and clutter-free your head is. I'm shocked."

"_You!_"

"None other."

John laughed, resting his hands on his helmet, shaking his head. He looked at Ysabelle, who was still watching the crystal reflect light in her hand, and opened a channel. "The longer you wait, Yssa, the harder it may be."

She glanced at John, then did as he had, flawlessly inserting the memory crystal. And heard a whisper in the back of her mind echoing around her head. Blinking, she asked, "Are you there?"

"Yes," came the male voice.

"What's your name?"

"You know my name. This is my chance, Yssa."

"I-Ian. _Ian_. Oh, no . . . not you. Ian, why did you do this to yourself?"

"I had constant painkiller running through my veins as I stayed in that tank. I had innumerable problems with how to position those misshaped limbs so that they didn't hurt. Don't you see, Yssa? I had to get out. I asked for this to happen because I needed to get out of that prison."

"But why?"

"Because I could be with my family again."

"Ian, I'll never see your face."

"You will."

"How?"

"Holotank. You'll see."

Mir watched, his black armor reflecting the light as he stood still. Ysabelle sat slowly, resting her head in her hands. The new MJOLNIR armor made her look menacing and untouchable, but she still was Ysabelle underneath it all. And right now he knew she was hurting. Before he could step closer, her hand shot out and stopped him with the gesture. Her voice accompanied it. "Ian's the AI."

"What? How did that happen? How did they do it? Why? What are the compliâ€œ"

John squeezed Mir's shoulder slightly more, reminding him to shut his mouth quicker in the future. His voice was soft, commanding, telling him to knock the questions off until she would be ready to answer them. "It doesn't matter."

Mir looked at the armor shielding his to-be mate from view, noting how she didn't move. She was talking with Ian, he knew, and he waited until her helmet aimed up at him again before walking over and holding his hand out. She looked at the outstretched hand, gripped it, and let herself be brought to her feet and held tightly against a comforting chest.

Things would be different from here on in.

John smiled behind his faceplate. "RenÃ©, I think that the others will be glad to have you back."

"Yeah. Just like the 'Threes will be happy to have Ian back." Her sigh was contented. "So. Shall we start the tests?"

"Alert Mir to clear off, and tell Ysabelle and Ian that I want them up and ready. Tell 'em to shelve their emotions until they can have a long face-to-face chat."

"In those exact words?"

John winced. "No. Make it sound nicer."

"Gotcha."

Different . . . and strange.

8. Chapter Eight

Faith's Fury

By: Sinead

Author's Note: In a snippet: The Xbox broke, I started a full-time job, my internet failed me many times over, and I'm really, really sorry that this has taken so long in returning to the update lists. It's been hard to squeeze out time with all my other writing projects, real-life problems, and overall insanity taking over my life. As is the life of any NorthEasterner. So. This chapter's favorite character is: RenÃ©, since she always loves to get the last word. And since I can't reply individually to your comments at the top of the page anymore, please understand that I am reading them, and I appreciate every one. (Read: make sure you go all the way to the bottom of the chapters following this one.) Thank you!!!_

Chapter Eight

"RenÃ©, start a countdown. I want to know when those blockheads are going to try to overtake us. And count the exact amount of contacts on the motion-tracker." He turned to Ysabelle, opened a com channel to her. "Yssa, get a lock on the door. If it moves, take it out."

She clicked her com in assent, then turned her focus upon the door, speaking. "Ian, hack into the satellite and get us a topo-map of the area, with nav-points and an overhead-view charted path of where we have to go. Realign everything the moment we're done here."

"Gotcha. Anything else?"

"Any suggestions?"

"Blow the crap outta 'em."

"My sentiments exactly."

John held his hand up, and they waited until the slim muzzle of a BR55 edged the flap of the door open. They were hidden in the shadows, so when the trooper didn't see any movement, he advanced slowly. Very slowly. Kudos to whoever taught him that Spartans weren't to be screwed around with.

"Chief, I'm counted seven in the immediate vicinity."

"And they have twelve in the surrounding woods, another dozen about a mile down the road we're supposed to sprint down, followed by . . . oh, you're going to love this . . ."

"Tell me on the way," Ysabelle said with a forced calm. John's left hand twitched and she sprang into motion, knocking the tentpole over with an open-palmed strike, then using it as an impromptu weapon to knock the rest of the marines senseless, sending weaponry and accessories flying willy-nilly into the tall grasses around them. Both Spartans fell flat on the ground, hearing startled shouts. The entire fiasco didn't even last a half-minute. Yssa grinned. "That was fun."

"You also pulled off the same maneuver that I had when I first received Cortana."

"The tent-pole thing?"

"Yep."

"Fun. Now what?"

John grinned, and the test truly began.

****o.O.o.O.****

"Aah, I hurt . . ."

Laughter bubbled up from deep within John's chest, surprising Ysabelle. He was leaning against the wall beside the bed she was in, her knee having just been operated upon to reattach tendons and ligaments that she had torn when she had lurched herself out of the way of a missile. Resting a hand upon her head, he replied, "But you did well."

"Thank you, sir."

"Ysabelle . . ."

"All right, thank you, John."

Tyr walked into the room, grinning. "Kid, you rock. That was great."

"You saw that?" Ysabelle asked softly, looking up at who had become a surrogate mother to the Spartan Threes.

The woman nodded. "Yes, as did your boyfriend."

"He's my mate," Yssa whispered, looking away from Tyr. The term "boyfriend" just somehow didn't really fit in with the way that she felt around Mir'wustumee. That was a human term, but what they felt was something more akin to how the Sangheili spoke of their inter-personal bonds.

John looked to his Spartan-II, who blinked, then held her hands up in a helpless gesture. He leaned over to rest his hand upon Yssa's brow, a bit awkward about it, but not showing it. "What's bothering you?"

"He always comes to see me . . ."

"They wouldn't let me in at first because of my species," Mir whispered from the doorway. "And I am not allowed into that environment . . . they do not believe that my presence in there would alleviate any of your anxiety." He growled sadly, adding, "They still believe that my kind and your particular 'breed' of soldier are blood-enemies."

John growled, "Mir'wustumee, you have a direct order to get your aft in here."

"And I back that order," Arbiter and Leader chorused, who had been silently standing behind the younger Elite, thus scaring him.

He hadn't heard them walk up behind him, and had to calm himself

before walking into the room and taking Ysabelle's hand. She gripped his back fiercely, looking up at his amber eyes with an expectancy. Chuckling his otherworldly chuckle, putting the others from his mind, Mir leaned in to nuzzle his forehead against Yssa's, muttering Old-Language reassurances and pledges to Yssa.

Arbiter looked to John and Tyr, then indicated that they follow himself and his brother out and back to the hangar. They said nothing on the way back, instead walking into Arbiter's receiving room and taking posts upon chairs, the desk, or the floor. Leader raised the question. "What are they going to do with our Brotherhood?"

John sighed, shaking his head. "You know that I have no more knowledge than you do. Mendez is trying to pull all the strings that he can, pulling all the stops out on what they have planned for us."

"I have the very bad feeling that it will not end well," Arbiter whispered, facing his armor with arms crossed over his chest.

The door opened, admitting Kidafan'asha and Jira'kirene. They walked to their respective mates, entwining arms around waists, or leaning against their firmly-toned yet war-touched bodies.

John sighed, hiding his face within large hands, then rubbed at his eyes, calling out one name. The name of one who would be able to get to the bottom of things, and who would hear him and help him in whatever matter he simply would ask of her.

"RenÃ©. I need you to do some digging."

"What'll I be looking for, Boss?" RenÃ© asked, appearing in a holotank to the left of Arbiter's desk.

He looked up at the holographic representation of a female Spartan in dress blacks, her feet and outline swirling into shadows from one moment to the next, a reminder that she wasn't exactly who she had been before being transferred into the AI program.

The gravelly, battle-hardened voice growled out, "Who. I want you to find some_one_."

"Say the name, I'll have them for you."

"Cortana."

". . . Boss, you always know how to ask the impossible."

9. Chapter Nine

Faith's Fury

By: Sinead

Chapter Nine

"Why do you want me to find Cortana?" RenÃ© drew her legs up to "sit" cross-legged in midair, dress-blacks shifting to become the traditional Sangheili robes of office. It wasn't the first time she

had done such a shift of wardrobes, as she was trying to find out what self-image she was going to portray.

"Because I need her to help us before she's retired."

"John, you know how many breaches that I'll have to make in order to merely _locate_ her? Nevermind trying to contact her. That _in itself_ is liable to get me transferred back into a human body."

"Is that possible?" Leader asked softly, afraid that the humans had actually mastered that technology.

RenÃ© looked at him, nodding silently. "It's happened before. Aged civilians who had volunteered to become informational AI . . . if they misbehaved . . . if they breached their boundaries that they had agreed to . . . were replaced into a flash-clone. We're not like the AIs that are created post-humus; we have no program."

Leader nodded in return, looking at Tyr. She sighed, then whispered, "I'll have myself flash-cloned if that happens. You deserve a Spartan body, at least."

RenÃ©'s face dropped . . . then picked back up in a sad smile. "Tyr . . . thank you. That's the most wonderful thing anyone could have said to me."

"I would have offered, but I doubt that you'd appreciate it as much," John muttered.

"John, no offense, but I would rather face termination than live out the rest of my days in a male body."

Jira barked a laugh, then grinned widely. "I heartily agree."

Stepping forward a pace, Arbiter asked, "What of finding Cortana? Was she not upon this ship when we were at Earth a week ago?"

"That's the problem. She was yanked without even Keyes knowing about it," John replied. "Trust me, I asked her. I had wanted to talk to Cortana about my Spartans becoming the team AIs, and when I had gotten Raziél instead, with him saying that Cortana was unavailable, and off-ship . . . well . . . imagine my surprise when I spoke with Keyes, ending up bringing _her_ the news. She spoke with UNSC command . . . and got the 'polite' answer that it was strictly none of her business."

RenÃ© bristled. "I don't give a damn if you're an Admiral or anyone else . . . Miranda doesn't deserve to be spoken to like that. I hacked into Raziél's databanks, and witnessed that conversation."

"Doesn't _that_ fall under the boundaries thing?" Leader asked solemnly, rubbing at his head and neck to try to stay awake after their long day at the training course.

"Nope. Because I know where Raziél is, and I know that if I'm contacted upon it, Miranda will let them know that I have free reign over her ship. Just like Ian does."

Asha walked into the room, bearing a tray of steaming mugs. "It seems that you and the Captain are upon good terms," she commented, making sure that the humans got their coffee, and that her kind got their favorite stimulant drink; they called it hev'ar.

"She and I had a lot of correspondence before I was fronted with the proposal that I become the Spartan team AI."

"That explains the first-name basis," John interjected, raising his gaze from his mug. "But back upon subject. Will you do that for me?"

RenÃ© sighed, still in her "mid-air" cross-legged pose. Then with a nod, she replied, "I will. Just . . . don't let them put me back into the tank, Chief. I-I couldn't . . ."

Standing and thumping his hand against the holotank in a strict matter, John growled, "Spartan, I forbid you from that line of thought. What is the primary objective a Spartan holds?"

"Winning," RenÃ© whispered.

"This is a direct order, Spartan RenÃ©-079." He hit the side of the holotank again, growling, "I will see to everything if it comes down to you being transferred into a human shell again. Until that point, you are to perform to the best of your ability."

"Yes, sir."

"Answer your commanding officer properly!" John barked in the voice he used upon the rookies, the new kids, the ones whom he scorned until they had done something to get his respect. Not acts of bravado or false heroism, but an actual courageous act of selflessness, one that saved lives.

The others watched on in silence as John stood over the holotank, over the shuddering form of his former Spartan. They knew that he knew what he was doing. She hugged her shoulders, looking up at him with heartbreak over her face. "Chief . . ."

"You wanted this. You got freedom. Now stop this pity-party. You once took on a squad of Mendez's goons, one against seven, and you won with your mind. With predicting their strategy and their tactics. Is this what you've become? Someone who can't even stand up to the challenge of merely finding another AI? I should have you put back into a human body, if this is what I've gotten myself into."

"Sir . . ."

"Spartan, you will stop this pity-party if you are to continue to serve as my team AI. I will have you stationed upon the ship and will take Raziellâ€™"

"Raziell couldn't find his way out of a paper bag!" RenÃ© snapped, standing and glaring up at John. "Furthermore, he couldn't stop me from hacking into his databanks! What makes you think that he'd be any good to you on the field?!"

Tyr looked at Arbiter, who had that curious Sangheili grin upon his

face. He held his hand up to his face in the mimicry of the humans' gesture for silence, masking it by taking a swig of his hot drink.

"He has an edge . . . like you _once did_."

"I have that edge! I still have it! Dammit, Chief, _you_ try being in that suspension fluids for over half of your life, remembering what it had been like outside . . . what it had been like to _live_."

"You're wallowing in your own self-pity, and I will _not_ allow that upon my team! That is your direct order, Spartan! Do you understand me?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"And I couldn't give a rat's ass about if you agreed with me or not about it," he said in a low tone, blue eyes glaring death at the hologram.

"I understand, sir."

"Then get _your_ ass moving, and find Cortana."

"Did that while talking, sir."

"Prove it."

She gave on-ship co-ordinates . . . and when they matched up with the very room they were in, everyone, including RenÃ©, blinked and paused. Tyr looked around at all those present, then at the Master Chief. He held up a small box the size of an old-fashioned mint tin, having pulled it from his pocket. Cortana appeared in a miniature hologram on the top, arms crossed over her chest with a proud grin upon her face. "That's more like it, RenÃ©."

"Wait . . . _you_ had it the entire time?" Leader asked, standing and bristling. "You _willingly_ put RenÃ© upon the line for something so _trivial_?!"

"Not trivial, Special Operations Leader," Cortana said, angling to look towards him. "Remember that I'm now talking from experience. When you're working with Spartans, you're going to have to do things that go against some programming at some point in time. The reason behind that is because you have to, so that the mission is fulfilled. This was training for RenÃ©. If she didn't locate me, then there would have been a harder test later on. Do you understand this?"

While she had been speaking, Leader's bristling had fallen away, and he had begun to listen to this reasoning with an open mind. When he nodded, Tyr spoke up. "Arbiter, you knew."

Everyone but John whirled to look at the Arbiter. He nodded, still smiling. "I did. I was with John when he had spoken with Miranda about this mission of sorts."

"Then . . . who did she talk to when she had spoken to an Admiral?"

"That was staged, and I had gotten Raziel to manufacture and adjust that false memory, leaving it where you could find it."

"But . . . I couldn't initially find that file . . ." RenÃ© said, frowning.

"Of course not. That, too, was a test," Cortana said, smiling. "DejÃ; had done the same to me, when I was training." She looked up at the Spartan holding her projector. "Mind plugging me back in? I've hit the twenty-five percent power limit. Any less and I'll go into a standby mode."

"Oh, no . . . we wouldn't want that," Tyr commented dryly. "That would mean that you'd be silent, wouldn't it? No, that's unacceptable."

"Tyr, with all due respect, shut up."

John plugged Cortana back in, laughing quietly. He watched as Cortana and RenÃ© shared space for one moment, glancing at each other before disappearing completely, leaving the group without a nosy AI to poke comments into their conversations. Looking up at the group assembled around the room, he said, "And I have the newest orders for our Spartans and our Sangheili."

"Which are?" Tyr asked through a yawn, the coffee not having taken any effect.

John indicated to Arbiter that he tell them. "We're stationed on Earth, but remaining ready for deployment when the moment comes to silence the Prophets."

Leader growled in pleasure, his eyes narrowing dangerously to half-closed slits. "How I long for the day. How I will enjoy that day."

"Won't we all, brother."

"But . . . the Covenant will be no more, correct?" Tyr asked, watching as the female Sangheili moved to sit behind their mates, curling up against their backs to rest their heads upon the right shoulder of each. Somehow, she saw this as ceremonial, and it had to be significant.

"That would be correct," Leader replied, not moving an inch from his seat upon the pillows where he had sat after hearing Cortana's logic about the test.

"So . . . we fight against the remainder of the Covenant . . . then what?"

"Then . . . then we do as my brother and our mates have just agreed with; what we have been discussing for many a long night," Arbiter whispered softly, his voice just above a growl. "Then we will do as we were taught to do; we will lead the Sangheili into their own again, and will ally ourselves with the humans. We will not enter a covenant, binding us to the humans, but we will swear to an agreement of honor, where both parties are considered equal." He indicated the doorway, where Mir had appeared, carrying Yssa very, very carefully

to place her upon a cushion, careful of the brace around her knee. He sat behind Ysabelle, positioning himself so that her leg would be propped upon his own comfortably, and his arms were loosely wrapped around her waist. "Where my own kin shows the trust that now lies between the Sangheili and human races."

"Trust? Lust is more of the appropriate term, Uncle," the younger woman said with a lopsided, tired grin.

"I won't argue that," the Arbiter said with a chuckle, reaching up to brush his fingers along Asha's face. "This is a new age we are entering into," he whispered. Standing, he walked over to John, lowering his face to look into the man's blue eyes. "And we need alliances like never before." Taking in a deep breath, the nonhuman closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, resuming his gaze with the pale man. "I hated you. Even recently, I hated you. You represent everything that I had fought against all my life. You had personally destroyed that which I had been assigned to protect."

"Halo," John whispered.

"Yes," came the breathy reply. "And I hated you even as we stood among comrades whom had not been fortunate enough to have adapted to the augmentation that so easily you adjusted to. I hated you for showing them to me, for showing me your weakness." Arbiter sighed. "But . . . now I see why you did that. You trusted me, even when I could not bring myself to trust you . . . Is there any way, brother-in-soul, that you can forgive that in me, and accept my support in this new age?"

John bowed his head, then sighed and looked up at the Arbiter, saying, "You know . . . I knew that you truly hated me all this time, but . . . humans are all about second chances." Drawing in a deep breath, he answered, "You got it, Arbiter. You're going to need all the support that you can get. Not all humans are enthusiastic about coming to terms with a former enemy."

"While we are on the matter of announcements," Asha said after a long pause where John and the Arbiter just stared at each other, the tension slowly draining from their bodies and temperaments as the minutes had moved on, "I have one of my own."

Arbiter tore his gaze away from his now-adopted brother, his face a mask of inquisitive confusion.

Kidafan'asha smiled and said into the silence, "I have to be excused from any military action. I am with child, and it will be due in a year's time."

And the usual chaos ensued after a birth announcement, women squealing with glee, men looking embarrassed and yet happy, and the father going up to the mother, embracing her as if she were made of porcelain, a new ferocity rising up within him to protect.

And, as is usual, there will always be something odd spoken into a moment of silent wonder. This time, it fell upon Mir to ask it. "But what of all the rituals?"

The two looked at him for one long moment . . . then each other, and

grinned. Arbiter embraced Asha again, sighing and resting his chin upon the top of her head. "We shall arrange it within the week."

"I shall start those preparations," Leader said, standing. "Mir, Yssa, John and Tyr, please come help myself and Jira make ready for a celebration. We will need your help in making things run smoothly."

Those who could stand and walk did, while Mir picked Yssa up again. With a grin, Leader turned and asked, "Did you want it upon the ship, or upon Earth?"

"Earth," the two whispered as one voice. Arbiter smiled at his brother, bowing his head. "Rtas . . . I thank you for helping me."

"It is what an elder brother always does for the younger. We both had helped each other when we were mated once before." Rtas 'Vadumee smiled for his younger brother, then bowed his head in return, seeing Jira smiling at him tenderly. "Come, then. Let's inform your daughter and granddaughter of this wonderful news."

"Where have the others gone?"

"To celebrate with Captain Keyes. She will be overjoyed to hear of this."

"I agree," he whispered, taking her hand in his in the human gesture and custom, one that he truly enjoyed, and walked with Jira'kirene into a new age.

End
file.